The Last Child

In the name of Him from whom .existence took its name

On one of those scorching summer days, I was busy arranging stationery on the shop shelves when suddenly, three teenage boys—about thirteen or forteen years old—rushed into the shop in a panic. Water was dripping from their heads and faces, and they were staring at me with eyes full of grievance.

Even though I was certain the weather was sunny, I instinctively turned my head toward the street to see what had happened that made them so soaked. But everywhere was dry and sun-drenched; there was no sign of rain.

I turned to them and asked in surprise:

"What happened? Has a hole opened in the roof of the sky?"

One of them, who was wetter and angrier than the rest, said with frustration:

"No, Agha Seyed, a hole hasn't opened in the roof of the sky. We were talking under the window of your house when someone poured a bucket of water over us."

Another boy added angrily:

"It was your mother!"

I asked, astonished:

"My mother?!"

"Yes, it was her."

I couldn't believe it. Why would my mother do such a thing? Under my breath, I cursed the devil and asked God to help me get through this day peacefully. I said to the boys:

"You stay right here; I'll bring you some towels in a moment."

I entered the house through the back door of the shop, moving quietly and without a sound. I stepped toward my mother's room and peered inside through the windowpane. There she was... my mother, sitting right there by the window. A bucket sat at her feet, and she looked as though nothing had happened at all.

I walked into the room, my voice trembling with suppressed anger:
"What on earth was that? Why did you do that?"
She slowly turned her head toward me, gave me a look, and then turned back to the window.
Her indifference made me even angrier. I stepped closer and said:
"I'm talking to you! What was that for? Those kids weren't bothering you! Why did you harass them? Do you take pleasure in tormenting others? What did they ever do to you to deserve this? Why are you ruining my reputation in the neighborhood? What do you want from me? What injustice have I done to you that I must pay this price?"
Without uttering a single word, she slowly lowered her foot from the chair, threw her chador over her head, and walked out of the house.
I felt sick. Even though there was no trace of maternal affection for her in my heart, I felt sorry for her. Her face looked innocent, and she was also my father's "Trust" (a legacy left to me). I knew that if I were to harass her in return for her provocations, my father's soul would be troubled. After all, my father—God rest his soul—always raised his hands to the sky after his prayers and asked God to make my mother his Hoor-al-Ayn (heavenly companion) in the hereafter.
I returned to the shop in a foul mood. The boys were still there. I realized I had forgotten to bring the towels. I apologized and said:
"I will compensate for any damage you've suffered..."
One of the boys, who always showed me great respect—or perhaps he was afraid of me—said sheepishly:
"Agha Seyed, I'm sorry..."
I felt that my distress over my mother's behavior had upset him as well. A memory came to mind that explained the reason for his deep respect.
One day, early in the morning, as I was leaving the house to open the shop, I saw him. He was carrying a bowl of Ash-e Nazri (votive soup) and heading toward a neighbor's house. I said jokingly:
"Give that Ash-e Nazri to me; it'll bring you a blessing!"
With a sharp, childish tone, he replied:

"Eat dirt!"And he quickly hurried away. I indifferently went on to open the shop. Only a few minutes had passed when his mother rushed into the shop. With one hand she gripped her son’s hand, and with the other, she held that same bowl of *Ash* firmly.
Trembling with fear, she placed the bowl on the counter and began to apologize profusely. She was cursing her son, repeatedly saying he was ignorant and shouldn’t have said those words. She begged me to forgive him. She told her son to apologize to me. In a pleading tone, she said:
"Agha Seyed, this boy has no sense. I swear to God, please forgive him."
I looked at the boy’s appearance. His clothes were covered in stains and *Ash*. I asked in surprise:
"What happened? Why are his clothes like this?"
The boy gave a bitter smile and wanted to say something, but his mother interrupted him, slapped him on the head, and said:
"Go ahead, laugh! Laugh now, but later you'll be crying for yourself!"
Turning to his mother, I said:
"For God's sake, don't hit him. What actually happened? Why are you so upset?"
With embarrassment, she said:
"I gave him a bowl of *Ash* to take to one of the neighbors. He came back home with filthy clothes and a broken bowl. I asked, 'What happened?' He said you were in the alley and said, 'Give the *Ash* to me, it'll bring a blessing,' and this ignorant boy gave a foul response. He hadn't gone more than a few steps when he took a fall with the bowl and the *Ash*."
The poor woman was deeply worried. She said she wouldn't leave the shop until I forgave her son.
I smiled and said:
"I swear to God, I wasn't upset at all. It was just a joke. I knew the *Ash* was for someone else. Truly, I wasn't offended."
But his mother wouldn't believe it. She kept saying this was a "sign" and she was worried something bad would happen to him. She asked me to explicitly state that I had forgiven him.

To put her mind at ease, I said:
"Alright, I forgive him."
It was as if water had been poured on a blazing fire; she calmed down instantly. All her worries seemed to vanish. She said happily:
"Now I can go home with a clear head. May God be pleased with you, Seyed-jan. Here is the bowl of *Ash*, enjoy it."
And while telling her son:
"You got lucky!"
They left the shop happily.
From that day on, her son held a special respect for me. Now that this incident with my mother pouring water had happened, he felt responsible. He said with a smile:
"Agha Seyed, don't be upset. The sun is out; we'll go stand under the window again, and our clothes will dry right up!"
About half an hour had passed since the incident, and my mind was still preoccupied with my mother's behavior when suddenly, Alireza, my female cousin's son, walked into the shop. He said with a smile:
"Hello, cousin!"
"Hello, Ali-jan. How are you? All by yourself in these parts?"
"Mom told me to come and tell you that *Zan-Amoo* (my mother) is at our house."
I was astonished. I asked:
"My mother is at your house right now?!"
"Yes, cousin."
I couldn't believe it. For years, my mother had no contact with any of my paternal relatives. In fact, we hadn't maintained relationships with them either, following her instructions. Sometimes, only a simple "hello" was exchanged on the street. Now, what had happened that made her go to my cousin's house?
I said:
"Wait, I'm coming with you."
I closed the shop. I even forgot to hang the "Back Soon" sign behind the glass. Alireza and I set off toward my cousin's house...
When we arrived, Alireza rang the bell with a special code so his mother would know who was at the door. The door opened, and my cousin, with a kind smile, came to welcome

us. After a warm greeting, I said with embarrassment:
"I’m sorry my mother has bothered you."
She replied with a smile:
"What kind of talk is that, cousin? This is your own home."
I asked:
"Where is my mother?"
My cousin’s eyes filled with fear and hesitation. It was as if she was afraid of my reaction. With a trembling voice, she said:
"Cousin... for God’s sake, don't upset *Zan-Amoo* (my aunt)."
It was clear that during this time, my mother had said things that had painted a distorted picture of me in my cousin’s mind. Of course, she had a point; with that innocent face and soft tongue, my mother could easily draw anyone to her side.
I gave a smile to reassure her:
"Don't worry, I just want to have a few words with her."
She asked:
"Are you sure?"
"Yes, I promise. Just tell me where she is."
"She’s sitting in the hall."
I asked her to come with me. We entered the hall. My mother was sitting there. As soon as she saw me, she shot a sharp look at my cousin, as if she were upset that she had informed me. She immediately stood up, pulled her chador over her head, and made a move to leave the hall.
I stood in front of the door and said:
"Who are you running from? I am your son, not your enemy."
She said sarcastically:
"Yes... of course, the son under the command of your brother and sister!"
I wanted to calm her down. I said:
"Sit down, Mother. I only have a few words to say."
She stepped back slightly, then sat down reluctantly. Her head was down, and she wouldn't look at me. I said:
"Why do we trouble others with our lives? Why do we share our problems with them, when we never shared our joys?"
I paused and then continued:
"Why won't you look at me? What are you ashamed of? Is it because you never felt any maternal love for me?"

I took a deep breath.
"I am a grown man now, but even today, when I see a mother stroking her child’s head, my heart aches. You left a longing for a mother’s love in my heart. Of course, I don't expect you to make up for those lost years now... it’s much too late."
I paused again, then continued in a low, pained voice:
"But you are my father’s legacy. And that man—God bless his soul—adored you. For his sake, I am willing to do anything I can for you."
She said mockingly:
"Oh, so now you've started with 'Father, Father'?"
With a lump in my throat, I said:
"Why shouldn't I? He was the only one who loved me. You even made me feel like an orphan while he was alive. I was the only one in his birth certificate..."
(After my father’s death, when they went to cancel his ID card, everyone was surprised to see that out of seven children, only my name was recorded in it.)
My mother said coolly:
"In my birth certificate, too, only your name is there."
I couldn't believe it. I turned to my cousin and said:
"State it here before a witness: if you need anything, say it now so I can provide it. I only ask one thing: don't ruin my reputation in the neighborhood. Let people think I have a mother. That superficial comfort is enough for me."
I turned my head toward my cousin to show I meant no harm to my mother. I saw tears streaming down her face. She felt sorry for me. Though I knew a man shouldn't cry in front of a woman, at that moment, I felt pity for myself... and my tears fell.
My mother didn't like this. Coldly, she stood up, threw her chador over her head, and left the house without even saying goodbye to my cousin.
I looked at my **cousin**. She was happy that my mother was returning home. I was also glad that this whole ordeal had ended without any **trouble**.
I apologized to my cousin for the **inconvenience**. She wiped away her tears, smiled, and said, "Thank God it ended well." I said goodbye and returned home happily. I decided to ask my mother if she needed anything so I could

get it for her. I opened the front door and went toward her room. Looking through the window, I saw the room was **empty**. To be sure, I opened the door and went inside, but there was no sign of her. I told myself, "She must have gone shopping, or maybe to the mosque."
I went back to the shop. The mother of one of the local boys —whose son was a supporter of the **Mujahedin-e Khalq** organization and had been missing for a long time— would occasionally come to my shop to **vent**. She used to tell me, "You've filled the void my son left behind."
I greeted her. She was so happy to see me that she almost hugged me. She looked at me closely and asked, "Are you alright, my son?"
"Yes, mother, I'm fine," I replied. "What's wrong? Why are you **anxious**?"
She said, "I came to see you, but the shop was closed. You hadn't even put up the 'Back Soon' sign. I thought you had something to do inside the house, but you didn't come out. I got **worried**, so I couldn't leave; I waited right here for you to return."
I looked at her worried face and instinctively said, "How good it is to have someone who cares about you. Lucky are your children to have a mother like you."
She gave me a deep look and said, "I swear to God, you are my **dearest**. I love you like my lost son. Every time I see you, I forget that he is gone."
I opened the shop door and said, "Come in."
She replied, "I won't come in until you tell me where you were and why you were **late**."
"I went shopping," I said.
"Then why have you come back **empty-handed**?" she asked.
"They'll deliver the goods by car," I answered.
But she didn't seem to believe me. Finally, she entered the shop and said, "Something tells me you didn't go shopping."
I stood behind the counter and was just about to reassure her when I suddenly heard the **screech of brakes**. I turned around and saw a police car pulled up right in front of the shop. Two officers got out and stood by the door. A moment later, a woman in a **chador** stepped out of the car, stood

between them, pointed at me, and said:
"That's him."
The officers acted as if they were facing a **fugitive killer**. One closed the shop door so I couldn't escape, while the other pulled out his **handcuffs**. Placing his other hand on his holster, he said firmly:
"Don't move. Don't even think about running."
In total shock, I had no idea what my mother had told the police to make them treat me this way. I raised both hands to show I wasn't dangerous and had no intention of fleeing. As the officer was about to cuff me, the mother of that missing boy suddenly threw herself on the ground, grabbed the officer's leg, slapped her own face, and **shrieked**:
"I won't let you take this son of mine too!"
The neighbors, hearing the commotion, gathered around. Some said:
"We know this boy. There's no need for handcuffs. He'll come with you willingly."
I was **stunned**. I looked at my mother. She kept her head down. She never dared to look me in the eye. Maybe she loved me, but she was ashamed.
I said to that grieving mother, "Don't worry, mother. My problem isn't **political**. That woman... she is my mother."
Upon hearing this, she seemed to get an electric shock. She let go of the officer's leg, stood up, and headed toward my mother. My mother, frightened, hid behind the officer. The woman began **insulting** my mother, venting all the pain in her heart:
"Shame on you! Who reports their own loved one? This boy is too good to have a mother like you!"
I repeated, "She is my mother."
With a **choked-up** voice, she said, "Fine, I won't say another word. I'll be silent. Forgive me, my son... but I won't let them take you! They'll have to go over my dead body..."
She was right. She had lost her child; her heart was bleeding. The people's **protest** made the police reconsider the handcuffs. They simply said:
"Forget about escaping. Just lock the shop quietly and come with us to the station."

I agreed. I told that mother, "Don't worry. It’s nothing important. If you care for me, go home and rest."
I locked the shop and got into the police car. I saw her through the window; she still hadn't taken her eyes off me. With a look, I **reassured** her not to worry—what happened to her son would not happen to me.
The police car drove off toward the **station**…

Thirty years had passed since that day when the telephone rang. I don't know why, but I felt a strange sensation; the ring sounded different than usual. I picked up the receiver with hesitation and said, "Hello."
My sister’s trembling voice came through: "My condolences… Mother has passed away."
The same mother I thought I didn't care about whether she was there or not. But at that news, the ground beneath my feet shook; it felt as if my roots had been ripped out of the soil. I was suspended in a void, with no support, my feet not touching the ground. I had no feelings; I didn't know whether to cry or laugh.
"God, why have I become like this?" I thought. "I never had a mother to grieve for, so why am I in this state?"
I looked around; my wife and children didn't know how to react. It was as if I had been injected with an anesthetic. At that moment, nothing mattered to me. I sat still, losing track of how much time had passed since my sister's call.
After the funeral, I called my eldest brother, Ramin. His wife answered. She asked: "Mansour, I have a question. Why is it that only your name is in Khanom-jan’s (Mother's) birth certificate?"
I couldn't believe it. Did my mother really love me too? I asked, "Are you serious?"
She replied, "I swear, when they opened her ID card, everyone was shocked; only your name was there."

Heaven is under the feet of mothers

It is not for nothing that they say that heaven is under the feet of mothers; because if there were no mother, there would be no love. Mother means loving, meaning life, meaning purity, affection and beauty. Mother means sacrificing oneself, meaning a guardian angel, meaning someone who sheds tears with your tears and laughs with your laughter.
Mother means an angel who sits above your head until morning on nights when you are sad or sick and says: “O God, take away my pain and calamity!” and without any pretense, sacrifices her life for the survival of her child.
A delicate being who removes mountains of problems from your path. If she were not in love, how could she gather all this beauty within herself?
The name “mother” is the most beautiful word that makes me feel peace and security when I hear it. For this reason, the name of mother became equal to the name of the homeland and became “Mother of the homeland”. May this name be blessed for all mothers.

But why was I deprived of such a mother? Why did she teach me enmity instead of friendship? Theft instead of purity? Why was her tongue always full of accusations?
I don't remember a single kind hand stroking my head. I don't remember an embrace or a kiss. My father left me alone and unprotected in an unfair environment before I was ten. By twelve, I learned to smoke; by thirteen, I was gambling. At fourteen, I became an orphan, and after that, it was beatings, beatings, and more beatings.
When I turned fifteen, I was seated by the opium pipe. I tried to end my life by swallowing twenty-four aspirin tablets, but even the next world rejected me, and I was condemned to continue living.
I fled home, dropped out of school, and eventually, after years of hardship and wandering through different cities in Iran, I ended up in the 1977 Revolution. While my friends became mayors and parliament members, I chose the path of independence and freedom. At 23, I built the first molding press machine in Iran. At 24, I built a supermarket with my own hands in my father's yard.

But life grew tight and difficult. Between suicide, burning down the drug den my home had become, and migration, I chose migration to start a human life away from injustice. I chose Sweden, thinking it was the freest country in the world.
I sold everything I had and left Iran. In Turkey, a smuggler stole my money and fled to Australia. In East Germany, I was arrested and handed over to West Germany. I finally escaped to Sweden.
I have lived in Sweden for thirty-five years now. Here, my assets were confiscated. My four-month-old baby developed cancer. Because I stood up for human rights, I was harassed and threatened with death. My back pain turned into heart trouble. I was forced to resign and fell into severe mental distress. And in the midst of it all, the news of my mother's death deepened my sorrow.
I was left with a world of betrayals and loneliness. My soul became so fragile that the smallest emotional scene would bring me to tears. All the tears I had stored up throughout my life began to flow. I was trapped in guilt, fear, and hopelessness, struggling with the responsibility of life in exile. Neither the police, nor lawyers, nor journalists helped me.
I was forced to ask a psychologist friend for help, but instead of helping, he tried to take advantage of my family. I had no choice but to choose between life and death for the third time...

▪And I chose life

"I was born into a family of eight: four sisters, two brothers, my parents, and myself—the ninth and final child. In truth, my mother had lost seven other children; had they survived, we would have been a family of sixteen.
Between 1940, when my eldest sister was born, and 1957, when I arrived, my mother spent about 14 out of those 18 years pregnant. She would conceive again before her

previous infant was even two or three months old, a relentless cycle. Among the seven children she lost were a pair of twins. One can only imagine the immense psychological and physical strain she endured—burdens she unintentionally passed on to her children in the womb.
My father owned a haberdashery and served as a beacon of support for the neighborhood. His shop was the first stop for anyone in trouble. He acted as a scribe for the illiterate and a mediator in matters of marriage, divorce, poverty, or unemployment. He was a fixer of others' lives and often succeeded. Yet, he carried a crushing weight of his own that no one could lighten, eventually leaving him broken. After my uncle's passing, my father's longing for death became so profound that the Angel of Death finally relented. My father took that hand with joy, closing his eyes to this world to find peace at last beside his brother."
"My parents' marriage was rooted in a neighborly bond. My maternal grandfather was a **Sayyid** and a respected cleric, held in such high esteem that locals claimed his shoes would magically align themselves for him. People from distant villages would travel just to seek his guidance.
One story often told is of a day when neighbors visited him for advice. As noon approached, he asked his wife to prepare a meal. She replied that the pantry was empty. He told her, 'Go to the basement and take one of the turkeys.' To her disbelief, the basement was filled with turkeys! She assumed guests had brought them. After cooking one, she returned to fetch another for the next day, only to find the basement completely empty once again.
Such tales led people to make vows (**Nazr**) and bring offerings to him. My mother’s very marriage was the result of such a vow. As a teenager, she fell gravely ill, and her father swore that if she recovered, he would give her hand in marriage to my father without any demands. She was healed, and with my grandfather’s blessing, they wed.
My father was drafted into military service during my mother's first pregnancy, leaving her to endure a difficult period alone. They lived in a vast house with a sprawling courtyard, but its emptiness terrified her. To ease her mind, my father sold it, planning a move to Tehran. However, my mother refused to leave, so he bought a smaller house

instead—the very house where I was born. My siblings always said I was the favorite, being the youngest.
My name was **Mir-Mansour**, but my parents called me '**Agha**' (Master/Gentleman). They insisted my siblings do the same; anyone who didn't faced my father’s sternest frown. My mother addressed my father as '**A-Mir Hassan**,' and he addressed her formally by her last name.
I was a restless, high-energy baby. My mother said I was impossible to swaddle; I would snap the cradle's straps and tumble out. One harsh winter, when meters of snow buried the city, wild animals ventured into town for food. A jackal broke into our house through the window. My mother, lurking under a quilt, waited for the beast to pounce on me. Just as it leaped, she threw the heavy quilt over it, trapping it. With the neighbors' help, they drove the animal out. That day, she saved my life, and I continued to grow—becoming even more energetic and spirited with every passing day."

Enrolling in First Grade Through a 'Favor'

My cousin, who was seven months older than me, enrolled in first grade at a school where my brother-in-law happened to be the principal. My mother, determined that my cousin shouldn't become an 'engineer' a year ahead of me, used this connection to pull some strings and get me into the same class. Her goal was twofold: to keep me busy and out of her hair, and to ensure I stayed on track with my cousin. According to education laws at the time, children born in the second half of the year had to wait until the following year to start school.
They didn't realize that '**if the first brick is laid crooked, the wall will be crooked even if it reaches the stars.**'
We ran into trouble from day one. Whenever the teacher called out our shared last name, both of us would stand up, and the whole class would burst into laughter. Other times, neither of us would budge, each thinking the teacher meant the other. Eventually, they had no choice but to split us into different classrooms.

My mother hoped school would drain my energy so I'd be calmer at home, but she was mistaken. I would return from school with even more vigor, ready to play. But instead of joining me, everyone tried to make me sit still, constantly urging me to be more like my cousin. The truth was, we were as different as fire and water. He was quiet, obedient, and calm; I was restless, mischievous, and bursting with life.

I was born into a bustling, large family, while he grew up in a quiet home with only one brother and one sister. He was a studious, 'good' boy who, I suspect, never felt the sting of a reprimand. I, on the other hand, was so spirited that I seemed to get a 'lesson' from one of my siblings every single day. It reached a point where if I hadn't been scolded or swatted at least once, I couldn't even fall asleep!"

"Both our fathers were haberdashers, working in the same neighborhood. My father earned more, bearing the entire financial burden of our family alone, as my mother stayed home to raise seven children. My uncle, however, had a more modest income; as a result, his wife—despite having three children—worked from home as a darter (repairing damaged clothing) to help make ends meet. In our house, my father was the manager; in theirs, my aunt held the reins.

They didn't own a home and lived with my eldest uncle—a remarkably kind man, deeply respected by the community. We, on the other hand, owned our house, which had two rooms and a storeroom. These differences fueled a silent but constant rivalry between our mothers.

My mother tended to prioritize herself over the children. When she bought meat, she would carve out the prime cuts to grill for herself. Because she adored me, she would sometimes toss the charred bits from the edges of her kebab onto my plate, while the rest of the meat went into a stew for the rest of the family. My aunt was the polar opposite; she fed her children until they were full before eating a morsel herself, dedicating her entire life to their success.

When the school bell rang, my aunt would meticulously inspect her son to ensure he wasn't bruised and his clothes weren't soiled. She would then take his hand, lead him

home, feed him, and prepare him for the next day. She discouraged him from playing with me, fearing my mischievous nature might rub off on him and distract him from his studies.

My mother, however, would force one of my sisters to fetch me from school every day. They suffered through the walk home with me, and once we arrived, they would give me a sound thrashing, swearing they'd never go back for me again—only for my mother to force them the very next day. Eventually, since the school was close, I was allowed to walk home alone. My cousin was always praised, while I was always punished. He was the obedient scholar; I was the rowdy underachiever.

I vividly remember the end of first grade. The entire school gathered in the courtyard for the distribution of report cards. The principal, the proctor, and the teachers stood facing us. As the proctor called out names one by one, students would step forward to receive their awards, greeted by cheers and applause from everyone."

"That day, the proctor called out our shared last name. My classmates nudged me, saying, 'The proctor is calling you!' Oblivious to reality, I stepped out of line and marched toward the principal and the teachers, standing proudly alongside the other awardees. Then, I saw my cousin walking toward us as well. It was only then that I realized the proctor hadn't meant me; he was calling my cousin. But it was too late. He had been named top of the class. He received his prize from the principal's hands to the sound of cheers and applause, while I had to retreat to my spot in line, accompanied by the smirks and muffled laughter of my peers.

I felt a crushing sense of shame that day. I began to loathe school and harbor a deep resentment toward the proctor. I wanted nothing more than to flee and go home. My aunt, who had witnessed the entire scene from afar, took her son's hand and walked past me with a triumphant, mocking smile. My cousin, however, was so captivated by his prize that he didn't even notice me.

I was in a daze and barely remember how I got home, but it seemed the 'tattletale crow' had already spread the news to the entire extended family. From that day on, I lost all

interest in school, yet they continued to force me to go every morning.
Whenever we were guests at my eldest uncle’s house and ran into their family, my aunt would ask me in front of everyone, 'Do you remember when my son came first and you went up to take his prize?' Then she would burst into laughter. Although she was generally a good woman, I grew to dislike her because she never missed a chance to reproach me or prevent her son from playing with me.
Her behavior made me avoid them over time and deepened my hatred for school. Fortunately, after a few years, they moved to Tehran, and I was finally shielded from their constant mockery.
Despite my feelings toward my aunt, I must admit she was an exemplary mother. Through sheer grit and despite their poverty, she ensured her children succeeded in their studies. She was a devoted wife who became the catalyst for her husband’s growth. Since she was related to **Khayami**, the CEO of Iran National, she secured a job for her husband there, and their lives improved day by day. After they moved, I only saw them a handful of times."
"During my childhood, cholera outbreaks were common, and many lives were lost to the disease. I vividly remember the health department trucks arriving at night, and we would be lined up for vaccinations. My mother had never attended school and was technically illiterate, but she bought weekly magazines like Javanan and Zan-e Rooz so faithfully that she eventually taught herself a bit of reading.
My father was never fond of meat. When I would fetch his lunch tiffin from the shop to bring back home, I’d notice he had left all the meat untouched. I made sure I was always the one to pick up the container so I could devour those leftovers before reaching the house. Eventually, I thought to myself: 'Since Father doesn't eat the meat and Mother doesn't seem to notice, why wait for the return trip?' From then on, while carrying his lunch to the shop, I would slip into the back alleys, pop open the tiffin, and enjoy the warm meat right then and there. I suspect my father knew; once he told me, 'You didn't close the lid tightly, and the food got cold.'

In all the short years of my father’s life, I don't recall him ever hitting me. Even though I was constantly in brawls and the neighborhood kids would run to his shop crying and complaining, he would just look at them in wonder and ask, 'There are two or three of you—how could my son, all alone, have beaten you?' They would reply, 'We hit him back, but it’s like he doesn't feel any pain!' My father would try to calm them down by saying, 'My son is a **Sayyid**, and his ancestors' spirit is fierce; he just loses his temper sometimes.' Once they left, he would gently advise me, asking why I kept getting into fights."

"In his shop, my father always kept a bottle of **Mercurochrome** (the 'red medicine'), a jar of cotton wool, and a jar of sweets specifically for the aftermath of my brawls. Whenever I got into a fight and thrashed someone, the victims would head straight to my father’s shop. He would first tend to their wounds and then give them a piece of candy, gently warning them, 'Better not play with my son.'

At the back of the shop, there was a small room where my father kept a wedding gown, a groom’s suit, a large samovar, a teapot, and a set of tea glasses and saucers. He would lend these out to impoverished couples who wanted to get married but couldn't afford the essentials. Because he was a 'trusted elder' (**Motamed**) of the neighborhood, whenever a person in need approached him, he would simply place a wooden pole—the one he used to hang his wares—across the shop’s entrance to show it was temporarily closed. He would then head out with a book of charity receipts to collect donations from other shopkeepers. He also kept a dedicated charity box in his shop, and customers would often drop a small contribution after making a purchase.

My father was also a skilled calligrapher. People who needed to write formal petitions or letters to government offices would come to him, and he would draft their letters for free.

Whenever he grew truly frustrated with me, he would lock me in that same small back room. The only thing inside was a single stool where I had to sit until I calmed down. Once

he sensed I was quiet, he would draw back the curtain—the signal that I was free to come out.
The relationship between my mother and father was very cold, even though my father loved her deeply. The more he tried to draw close to her, the further she pulled away, and as a child, I never understood why. Often, they would both be in the same room but wouldn't speak to each other directly. My mother would say to me, 'Tell your father...' and my father would reply, 'Tell your mother...' Most of their arguments, it seemed, revolved around me."
"On Fridays, my father's shop was closed. To give my mother a bit of rest, he would take my hand, and we would stroll together toward the **Taze-Abad** cemetery.
Along the way to Taze-Abad, there was another cemetery guarded by a massive iron gate. It was a double gate: a small door for people and a larger one for vehicles, both of which had to be unbolted to open. However, every time we passed by, those gates were firmly shut.
One night, I dreamed that I had entered that forbidden cemetery. What struck me most was how different the graves were compared to those in Taze-Abad. In Taze-Abad, the headstones were simple, laid flat on the ground, and all aligned in the same direction—some adorned with a single flower pot. There were also private family chambers, of course. But in the cemetery of my dream, the headstones stood upright, many adorned with large, imposing statues. Some graves even featured their own walls and roofs, like miniature houses for the dead."

"Finally, Friday arrived. As we approached the mysterious cemetery on our usual walk to **Taze-Abad**, I realized I had no idea what lay behind those closed gates. About ten meters from the main entrance, I tucked at my father's hand and asked, 'What is this great big gate?'
'This is the **Armenian Cemetery**,' my father replied.
'But why is it always locked?'
'Entry is restricted,' he explained. 'Only those who own a plot here or have relatives buried inside are allowed in.'
I looked at him, feeling a strange pull. 'I really want to see inside. It feels so familiar... as if I've been there before.' My father shook his head. 'It's always closed. There's a caretaker; you have to knock, and he doesn't usually let strangers in—especially children.' But I persisted with such fervor that he finally gave in and rang the bell. The caretaker opened the door and peered out. 'What do you need?' he asked. My father gestured toward me. 'My son is insistent on seeing the inside, if you'd permit us.' The caretaker looked at me, seemingly sensing my genuine curiosity, and stepped aside to let us in.
As I stepped inside, a wave of recognition hit me. Everything was exactly as I had seen it in my dream. 'I've been here!' I exclaimed to my father. 'Come, let me show you what is where.' My father watched in astonishment as I navigated the grounds with ease, identifying landmarks I

had never seen in waking life. It was a moment of pure wonder for him.
After we left, my father thanked the caretaker, and we continued toward Taze-Abad. There, he followed his ritual of stopping at the graves of friends and acquaintances to recite the **Fatiha**. He would lead me from one headstone to another, telling me their stories: 'This man was incredibly wealthy,' he would say, or 'This one was a beggar. This person was righteous, while that one was wicked.' Then he would add the lesson: 'But now, they all lie side by side, and not one of them took even a single **Rial** with them to the next world.'
He taught me that the only thing a person truly carries beyond this life is the blessing and goodwill of others—wealth we deposit through good deeds and helping those in need. 'A human being should never think only of themselves,' he would say. Then, he would recite this poem for me:"
"My father would often recite these lines to me, teaching me the impermanence of the world:
Everything in this world is nothing, and all its affairs are nothing.
Oh 'Nothing,' do not twist yourself for 'Nothing' upon 'Nothing.'
Do you know what remains of a human after death?
Only kindness and love; all the rest is nothing.
In those years, the first municipal buses had just begun to operate in Rasht. There was a bus stop near our house, located at **Iraq Bridge**. From then on, we would sometimes take the bus to the **Taze-Abad Cemetery**, and afterward, we would head to the **Hajji Bathhouse** in the historic **Sagharisazan** neighborhood."
"After the bath, we would visit my father's friends—fellow shopkeepers—and share tea with them. Whenever I was with him, I felt a profound sense of peace and comfort. But as soon as Friday drew to a close, my mischief would flare up again. My mother would frequently beat me, threatening, 'I'll tell your father to hand you over to the **Dar-al-Aytam** (the orphanage)!' My upbringing was a constant source of friction between them; my father was strictly against physical punishment and would rescue me

from her hands whenever he saw her hitting me. To put it simply, the situation at home was dire.
Amidst these constant quarrels, threats, and the cold silence between my parents, I finished my third-grade exams. School was out for the summer, and while we were waiting for my results, my father had a dream...

The Dream and the Secret Journey to Mashhad

Early one morning, my father woke up and immediately roused me. He waited for a brief moment, timing it for when my mother stepped out of the room to fill the kettle. Once she was gone, he whispered, 'Put on your new clothes today.'
'Why?' I asked. 'Where are we going?' He didn’t answer; my mother had just walked back in.
As soon as she stepped out again, he leaned in. 'We’re going somewhere wonderful, but don’t say a word to your mother.' While she was busy preparing breakfast, I scrambled to find my best clothes. I found a couple of shirts and asked her, 'Where are my trousers?'

My mother grew suspicious. 'Where on earth are you two going?' she demanded.
My father nudged me. 'Tell her we’re going to the bathhouse.' Since they weren't speaking to each other, they communicated through me.
'But today isn't Friday,' my mother countered.
'I know,' my father replied shortly, 'but we’re going to the bathhouse anyway.'
She fell silent, waiting for the tea to brew. We finished dressing before the tea was even ready and sat down for breakfast. Her suspicion deepened. 'Why are you in such a rush, dressed before even eating?' My father didn't answer, but his restlessness was palpable. He kept muttering, 'Hurry up.'
We bolted down our breakfast and hurried out. As we passed the laundry line, my father spotted my freshly washed pajamas. 'Take those, too,' he commanded. I reached for them but felt they were still damp. 'They’re wet!' I protested.
'Take them anyway,' he insisted.
I grabbed them, and we stepped out of the house. We headed toward his shop—though 'walking' isn't the right word; he was marching so fast I had to run to keep up. We reached the **Sagharisazan** neighborhood, and my father unlocked the shop door."

My father’s shop door consisted of eight wooden panels. He slid two of them aside and stepped inside. He grabbed a small hand-tote and packed a few undershirts and pairs of socks. Then, he shuttered the shop, placing the two heavy iron bars that locked the doors from either side into their slots, and secured them with an antique padlock—the kind that required several full turns of the key to catch.
'Wait right here in front of the shop until I get back,' he told me.
A few meters away was a tailor and cobbler’s shop owned by an old man named **Ghadimi**. He had a son my age and a daughter with a disability. My father disappeared into the shop for a few minutes and then returned. We set off toward the **Goldsmiths' Bazaar**, where my eldest uncle owned a jewelry shop.
When we arrived, my father again told me to wait outside. Through the shop window, I watched as my uncle stood up the moment my father entered. They embraced and kissed. After talking for a few minutes, they shared another embrace and walked out together. My uncle scooped me up in his arms, kissed me, and said, 'Take care of yourself, and don't give your father a hard time.' Then, he pulled a piece of candy from his pocket and handed it to me.
I picked up our bag, and we walked for a few more minutes until we reached a travel agency known as **Garage Shisheh** (The Glass Garage). My father bought the tickets. We sat for a while as passengers trickled in and boarded the bus. I took my seat right next to him.
The bus wasn't even full yet when it began to roll slowly forward. The driver’s assistant leaned out of the window, shouting for any last-minute passengers. This was my very first time on a long-distance bus. A strange anxiety gripped me, and terrifying thoughts began to race through my mind. I thought to myself: 'What if my father is taking me out to the middle of the desert to get rid of me?'"
"After collecting the tickets and taking money from the fare-paying passengers, the bus conductor moved to the front, handed the cash to the driver, and took his seat beside him. The bus gradually cleared the city limits. The further we strayed from our house and the shop, the more my heart sank. I kept pleading internally: *'Dear God, where are we*

going? I didn't do anything wrong yesterday... what if he really is taking me to the orphanage?'
I remembered the time they had driven me right up to the gates of the orphanage just to scare me. Now, I kept darting glances out the window and then staring at my father's face with trembling anxiety, trying to gauge if he was angry with me. If he looked upset, I was sure he had a dark plan in mind!
But I saw him whispering the **Fatiha** under his breath. He blew a gentle breath as a blessing and began counting his prayer beads. The calmer he became, the more restless I grew. Finally, trembling with fear, I managed to ask,
'Father... where are we going?'
He simply smiled, said nothing, and continued with his **Tasbih**. That smile gave me a flicker of hope, but his silence only deepened my worry. I pleaded again:
'Father, I swear by God, please tell me where we're going! I promise... I promise I won't misbehave anymore...'
My father took my head between his hands, kissed my forehead, and said, 'Don't be afraid, my son. Don't let your mind wander to dark places. Let me tell you...'
He began to recount the dream he had seen:
'Last night, I dreamed of **Hazrat Fatima Zahra** (peace be upon her). She was leading me and a group of blind men toward Mashhad. She walked at the front, I followed her, and the blind men followed me. I was their guide, and she was mine. We were nearing the gates of Mashhad and the golden dome of Imam Reza when she turned around and said, "Amir-Hassan, we must go back."
"Why?" I asked. "We've come all this way!"
She replied, "We've left behind the youngest member of your family. We must go and get him."
So now, I am taking you—the youngest of my family—on a pilgrimage to **Imam Reza**, because the Imam himself has summoned you.'
Hearing those words, my heart finally found peace. I didn't know where Mashhad was, but I knew for certain that I wasn't being abandoned in the desert. Slowly, I drifted into a calm I hadn't felt all day."
"The bus stopped from town to town, taking on new passengers. I believe we had reached the city

of **Gonbad** when the bus pulled over again. Several people boarded, including two stout women dressed in long black chadors with leather face-veils (**Niqabs**).
The bus conductor turned to my father and said, 'You only bought one ticket, so your son has to give up his seat for one of these ladies.'
One of the women took my spot next to my father. They brought me a small, rickety wooden stool and placed it right in the middle of the aisle. The stool was unstable; every time the bus swerved left or right, I'd be tossed sideways. A few times, I bumped into the large lady, and she grumbled, muttering something in Arabic while pushing me away. Seeing this, my father looked troubled. He gestured toward me and said to the woman, '**Innahu Sayyid, Innahu Sayyid**' (He is a descendant of the Prophet).
Upon hearing this, the woman's demeanor changed instantly. She stood up with great reverence and insisted I take her seat. However, I remained on the stool; she was too large for it, and it surely would have snapped under her weight! From that moment on, not only did she stop pushing me, but she became my protector, constantly peeling fruit for me. Wrapped in her hospitality and newfound respect, we finally reached Mashhad.
After bidding them farewell, my father asked around for directions to a lodging house near the Shrine. We eventually checked into a place called '**Bahar Guesthouse**,' where my father rented a room for a week. After a short rest, he asked me to help him write a letter to our family so they wouldn't worry. He drafted a few lines and guided my hand as I added a few words of my own. Once the letter was finished, we prepared for the Shrine. As we were leaving the room, we ran into a man and his daughter—who was about my age—staying in the adjacent room. After a brief greeting, we set off toward the **Holy Shrine of Imam Reza** for prayer."
I cherish those memories... every morning we would wake up early and walk toward the Shrine for the dawn prayer. My father would hang a box of prayer stones (**Mohr**) around my neck and ask me to distribute them among the worshippers. I did this with great enthusiasm, then stood by his side to pray. It was during those days that I learned

the **Adhan** and **Iqama** so well that upon our return to Rasht, I was able to recite the call to prayer in our local mosque.

I remember one day in the Shrine, while my father was deep in prayer, I was playing with a Mohr beside him. I kept tossing it into the air and catching it just before it hit the ground. After several successful throws, I flung it up with too much force. As I reached out to catch it, my hand struck it hard, sending the stone flying straight into my father's forehead. I clearly heard the thud! I froze in terror, but my father continued his prayer without breaking his focus. When he finished, he turned and gave me a sharp, piercing look. His anger was evident. He rubbed his forehead to check for blood, then looked at his hand; fortunately, there was none. To suppress his rage, he simply muttered under his breath:

'May God's curse be upon the soul of Satan.'

I was trembling, expecting a heavy blow to the head, but thankfully, it never came.

Our daily routine was simple: we went to the Shrine in the mornings, and on the way back, my father would buy bread, watermelon, cheese, and fresh Mashhad mulberries for our meals. Back at the guesthouse, we would eat, my father would rest, and I would spend hours playing with the daughter of the family in the next room. Day by day, our bond grew stronger. Throughout that week, playing by her side brought me a peculiar sense of peace.

The days slipped away until the day of departure arrived. My father packed our bags, and we went to say our goodbyes. He knocked on their door, and the girl's father answered, but she was nowhere to be seen.

'Where is your daughter?' I asked.

'She is heartbroken that you are leaving,' he replied. 'She doesn't want to say goodbye.'

I stepped into the room and saw her sitting in a corner, huddled in her grief. I called her name; she turned, and I saw she had been crying. As I went to sit beside her, she stood up, threw her arms around me, and wept quietly in my embrace."

"My father called out to me: 'Hurry and say your goodbyes, we must leave.'

But neither of us wanted to let go. Finally, under the insistence of our fathers, we were forced to say goodbye like 'grown-ups.' What a bitter moment it was... with our gazes, we tried to halt the march of time, but we were powerless. Time raced ahead. Her eyes were brimming with tears. As for me, being a 'man,' I felt I had to hide my own tears from her.
I had no strength to move. My father took my hand and pulled us apart. A terrible sensation washed over me, as if I were being severed from myself. My body detached from hers, but I left my soul behind with her. It felt as though she were my other half; during that short time, we had become one. I believe she felt the same. We had completely forgotten our fathers were standing right there, watching us.
At their continued urging, and with lumps in our throats, we parted ways. Hand in hand with my father, we headed to the bus station and boarded the coach back to our city, Rasht. But it felt as if my spirit hadn't come with me. During the entire time I was away from my family, I hadn't felt a single pang of homesickness. But now, I truly understood the agonizing meaning of being torn away from an attachment.
My father began to counsel me: 'From now on, you are under the protection of **Hazrat Fatima Zahra** (PBUH), and you must strive to be a good boy.'
He didn't know that I had left my very existence back in that guesthouse. I simply replied, 'Yes, Father. Of course, Father.'
Finally, we reached Rasht. My father knocked twice on the door, then opened it with his own key. My mother and two of my sisters came forward to greet us. But from the look on their faces, it was clear they were deeply resentful of our sudden disappearance."
"From that day on, the dynamics at home shifted. Before my father’s dream and our trip to Mashhad, I had been my mother’s favorite, and she always took my side. But after our return, I gradually became 'Father’s boy,' and this was not at all pleasing to my mother.
My siblings wouldn't miss a single chance to tease me. They would give me a playful pinch and grumble, 'Why did Father

take *you*—the youngest—to Mashhad? What about us? We're the older ones!'

My sister had picked up my report card from school. I had done well in subjects like art, physical education, and crafts, but my other grades were lackluster. I needed help with my studies, but the truth was, I only enjoyed the 'play' part of school, not the lessons or the homework.

It was summer, and school was out. To keep me out of trouble and prevent me from picking fights with the neighborhood kids, my father set up a makeshift stall for me in front of his shop using a fruit crate. He went to the local confectionery and bought a box of **Rahat-al-Holoqum** (Turkish Delight) and a box of **Kak** (traditional brittle pastry), placing them on my 'desk.'

'You sit here and sell these,' he instructed. 'Give me the cost price so I can restock for you, and you can keep the profit for yourself.'

I agreed. However, I never actually turned a profit. Whatever I sold, I would calculate the earnings and immediately eat that exact amount in sweets! I would only hand over the base cost to my father so he could buy more stock for me to 'sell'—and eat—all over again."

"Gradually, I began to take initiative. Using paper and pins, I would craft pinwheels, spears, kites, and other trinkets to sell. I also took it upon myself to sweep my father's shop, knowing full well that coins often slipped beneath the counter. The shop floor was made of wooden planks, and money would get wedged in the crevices. On the pretext of sweeping, I would pry up the boards and retrieve the coins. My father knew exactly what I was doing, but he remained silent.

Every now and then, my mother would stop by the shop—officially to see me, but in reality, to keep an eye on my father. On one such visit, she noticed several women with children sitting on the steps of the mosque directly across from the shop. Those steps led down to the mosque's restrooms; people would often wait there while a relative was inside. However, on that particular day, by my father's misfortune, a group of women happened to be sitting there, their gaze naturally falling toward his shop.

My mother instantly convinced herself that these women were there specifically because of my father! She rushed into the mosque’s washroom, grabbed a water ewer (**Aftabeh**), and while shouting '**Ya Allah, Ya Allah**' (a warning for people to clear the way), she began dousing the steps with water. Her goal was to force them to leave and ensure no one could sit there for quite some time. She would even hurl insults at them, truly believing they were there to entice her husband."

The Conflict Over My Offerings and the Incident with the Ruffian

One day, while my father was away at the market, I was sitting behind my makeshift sweet-stand, counting the pastries to see what I’d sold. Suddenly, a typical neighborhood 'tough guy' (**Dash-Mashti**) appeared. He was sporting a thick mustache, a black suit, and a fedora (**Shapo**) perched on his head. His jacket was draped over his shoulders, and he wore patent leather shoes with the heels folded down—a common habit in the heat.
'Hey kid, where’s so-and-so?' he barked.
I never cared for these rowdy types, and honestly, I hadn't even processed what he said. I ignored him and went back to my counting. Seeing my father was away and I was alone, he suddenly cuffed me over the head and kicked my stand, sending all the **Rahat-al-Holoqum** and **Kak** sweets scattering into the dirt.
Our neighbor across the street witnessed everything but was too terrified of the man to intervene. People feared these thugs; many even paid them protection money just to be left in peace. Remembering my promise to my father to be a 'good boy,' I merely looked at him with sorrow and bent down to gather the sweets from the ground.
At that exact moment, the screech of tires pierced the air, followed by a woman’s piercing scream. People started running from all directions. Amidst the chaos, the same

neighbor who had watched the man strike me rushed over, hugged me tightly, and tried to shield my eyes. He whispered frantically in my ear:
'May I be sacrificed for your ancestors! What kind of curse did you put on him? You've wiped this poor soul off the face of the earth!'
I realized then that the man who had mistreated me had been struck by a car while trying to cross the street. I wanted to see what had happened, but the crowd had already swarmed the scene, circling him completely.

"People began scattering money on the ground where the accident happened, and soon an ambulance arrived to take him away. As the crowd dispersed, a few people approached me, whispering among themselves: 'We saw what happened from the dry cleaner's; we saw how poorly he treated this child right before the crash.'
The woman who had screamed earlier kept looking at me through her tears. 'The sigh of the oppressed,' she murmured, 'how quickly it caught up with the oppressor.'
She bent down, kissed me, and went to buy me an ice cream.
Just then, my father returned. His first thought was that I had started another fight and that the crowd gathered around the shop was there to complain. He rushed over, only to find me calmly eating ice cream while people pampered me. 'What happened? What's all this?' he asked.
The neighbors recounted the story, and word began to spread like wildfire. Every day, people—mostly women—would visit the shop just to see me. They brought offerings (**Nazri**). Some would hand me a piece of fabric to touch, or a glass of water to blow my breath into, believing it would heal their sick relatives. They would beg my father to tell the story, and he would recount what he had heard from the neighbors. When they asked if he had seen any 'signs' before this, he would tell them about his dream of **Fatima Zahra**.
Slowly, the vows and petitions grew. People made promises to God, received their 'miracles,' and came back to thank

me, while I barely understood what was happening. They would simply kiss me, leave their offerings, and go. Eventually, they found out where we lived. On Fridays, when the shop was closed, they would bring their vows to our front door. My mother was deeply unsettled by this. One person would knock to give me a pair of socks; another brought a wedding dress, insisting I run my hand over it to ensure the bride's happiness. The simplest request was for me to blow into a glass of water. Sometimes, they weren't satisfied with just a breath and insisted I add a bit of saliva to the water so their patient would recover even faster.
"Soon, people began returning with astonishing news that their sick relatives had been healed, bringing their offerings in gratitude. Whenever the doorbell rang, my mother would answer it herself. If she realized the offering was for me, she would seize it, toss it aside, and bark:
'My son is not a beggar!'
This deeply upset my father. 'They mean well,' he would say. 'Why do you have to break people's hearts like that?'
Gradually, the distance between my mother and father widened. It was mostly my mother who withdrew herself. My father began sleeping alone in the guest hall, which had a window overlooking the street, while my mother, my sister (who was twenty months older than me), and I slept in the other room.
These two rooms were connected by a tall wooden door with a glass pane at the top. They were also linked through the main hallway. When my father was away at the shop, my mother would leave the connecting door open to let the air circulate. But the moment he returned, she would firmly shut it.
We also had a tiny room that served as both a storeroom and a kitchen. It was there that I once nearly set the entire house on fire...

The fire in the kitchen and the return to school

Our household stoves each had their own unique shape and purpose. The '**Valour**' and '**Aladdin**' models were tall with circular wicks. Then there was the '**Three-Wick**' stove—short, wide, and equipped with three flat wicks that generated intense heat. These stoves consisted of three parts: the fuel tank at the base, the wicks in the middle, and a circular metal grate on top for supporting pots and pans.
One day, while my mother was busy washing clothes in a large galvanized tub in the courtyard, she called out to me: 'Go check on the food, make sure it’s not burning!'
Bursting with pride and eager to be helpful, as always, I rushed into the kitchen. I tried to lift the pot off the three-wick stove to turn down the flame, but in my clumsiness, I lifted the pot along with the entire upper grate of the burner. Everything was scorching; my hand burned, and the pot slipped from my grip. Suddenly, the oil ignited—fire!
Panic seized me. My first instinct was to grab a stray rag and toss it over the flames. I did just that, then bolted out of the kitchen and ran to the far end of the courtyard, huddling behind my mother while she continued scrubbing the laundry.
I kept a wary eye on the kitchen from a distance, waiting to see if the fire had died down. At first, there was only smoke. I tried to convince myself it was just the embers, but the smoke grew thicker and darker. Terrified, I finally spoke up: 'Mom... I think there’s smoke coming from the kitchen.'

My mother dashed toward the kitchen in a frenzy. She grabbed a heavy quilt, smothered the flames, and hauled the entire three-wick stove out into the middle of the courtyard. Once she was certain the danger had passed, she turned her sights on me...
And right there, she gave me the thrashing of a lifetime! By the time she grew tired and let me go, the ordeal was over, but my body ached for an entire week. Since it had been a while since my last beating, the physical toll felt even heavier!
Summer drew to a close, and schools reopened. I entered the fourth grade. Only a week into the school year, our school was asked to select a group of students for the **Scouting** program. Tzhe principal, who happened to be my brother-in-law and was very conscious of his reputation among the teachers, came to me and said: 'You must join the Scouts.

Learning to Steal from My Mother

One day, our school principal—my brother-in-law—called me into his office.

'You must become a Scout,' he said. 'Here is the list of equipment you need. Tell your parents to get them for you.'
I raced home, bursting with excitement, and showed the list to my mother. 'The principal says I have to be a Scout! Here’s what I need.'
'What does it say?' she asked.
'A whistle, a braided rope, and...'
'Wait for your father to get home,' she interrupted. 'Tell him then.'
I waited anxiously until my father returned from the shop. He went into the guest hall and changed into his pajamas. My mother nudged me: 'Go on, tell him now.'
In our house, it was custom to shut the middle door once Father arrived. I had to go all the way around through the hallway to enter the room from the other side. I approached him and said, 'Father, the principal said I have to be a Scout. Here is the list.'
He looked at it and said nothing. I asked hesitantly, 'Will you buy them for me?'
My father frowned. 'Scouting isn't mandatory! The principal is talking nonsense. Go to bed; I’ll go tell him myself tomorrow that you aren’t joining.'
'But I want to be a Scout!' I said, my voice trembling.
'The uniform is expensive,' he replied firmly. 'I’m not buying it.'
I burst into tears and retreated to my mother’s room, heartbroken. She comforted me, whispering, 'Don’t be sad. I’ll buy it for you myself...'
I fell asleep with a heavy heart. The next morning, I asked her, 'What should I tell the principal?'
'Tell him we’re buying it,' she said.
I went to school overjoyed, telling the principal and all the other kids that I was getting my uniform."
"When I returned home that afternoon, I looked at my mother and said, 'Well, let’s go buy it then!'
'We don’t have the money right now,' she replied.
'Then when will you buy it?' I asked, my heart sinking.
'When do you need to bring the uniform to school?'
'In two weeks.'
'Good,' she said calmly. 'We have time. Don’t rush; I’ll buy it.'

The next day, while my sister was out of the house, my mother called me over. 'From today, we must start gathering the money for the uniform. But first, you must promise—not a word to anyone.'
'I promise!' I exclaimed.
'If you let it slip, no uniform for you.'
'I promise,' I repeated.
She led me into my father's room. 'When your father comes home, he hangs his suit right here,' she said, reaching into the closet and pulling out one of his jackets to show me. 'We have two weeks to collect the funds. Every day, you will take a small amount from his trouser pockets and bring it to me.'
I stared at her in disbelief. 'But you said *you* would buy it for me!'
'I don't have the money,' she answered flatly.
'Then why don't you take it yourself?' I countered.
'I need to be on the lookout and keep an eye on your father,' she explained.
'I'm scared,' I whispered.
'Don't you want that Scout uniform?' she asked, testing me.
'I do...' I said reluctantly.
'Then you mustn't be afraid.'
I had no choice but to agree.
'Whenever I give you the signal,' she instructed, 'quietly pull back the jacket flap and reach into the trouser pocket. If there are fewer than seven or eight bills, take only one. If there are many, take two. Always pull from the middle, never from the top. And look at this bill—this is the sample color. Try to take this kind.'"
"We began our mission the following day, which happened to be a Friday.
My father stepped out of the room to go to the outhouse. My mother whispered, 'Go now, don't be afraid. I'm on lookout. Just come out immediately if I cough.'
I slipped into my father's room and reached into his pocket. There was a thick stack of bills. I pulled out two, straightened the jacket exactly as it had been, and hurried back. My mother's face lit up.
'Well done!' she said. Then she asked, 'Did you leave the jacket tidy?'

'Yes,' I replied.
She went in to inspect it herself and returned with a nod. 'Excellent work. Rest assured, I will buy you that uniform.'
I was overwhelmed with joy. For the first time in my life, I was going to wear something brand new. You see, my clothes were always hand-me-downs. My father's old clothes went to my eldest brother, then to the middle brother, and finally to me. My mother would even turn the old fabric inside out so the unfaded side would show, making it look 'fresher.' But now, I was going to have a new uniform! I would show it off; I would finally shine.
From that day on, whenever my father headed to the restroom, I stood guard. For two weeks, I retrieved money from his pockets daily and handed it to my mother. Every time I said, 'I think that's enough now,' she would insist, 'No! We still need more.'
After a week, I asked, 'How much have we gathered?'
'About fifteen or sixteen **Tomans**,' she replied. 'If you bring that much again, I'll cover the rest myself.'"
"During the second week, temptation finally got the better of me. I snatched three bills instead of two, but I only handed two to my mother. I kept the third one for myself. With that bill in my pocket, I headed to the local grocery store. I told the shopkeeper, 'I want ten **Shahis** worth of chickpeas and ten Shahis of sunflower seeds.' He fashioned two cones out of old newspaper, filled them up, and handed them to me. When I handed him the bill, he squinted at it.
'What's this?' he asked.
'It's a **Toman**,' I replied, my voice steady despite my racing heart.
'No, little one,' he said firmly. 'This isn't just one Toman! Where did you get this kind of money?'
Panic set in. 'I got it as an **Eidi** gift,' I stammered.
'Go tell your mother to come and collect the change,' he commanded. I walked out of the shop, my stomach churning with regret.
I knew that if I told my mother about the grocer, I'd be in for a brutal thrashing, and worse, she might call off the whole Scout uniform plan. I had already bragged to all my classmates that I was getting a new outfit; how could I possibly ask her to go to the grocer for change? So, I kept

my mouth shut. I tried to convince myself that the shopkeeper was just trying to scare me and intended to pocket the money, thinking I'd be too afraid to say anything.
A few days later, I went back to buy something on credit.
'Did you tell your mother?' he asked immediately.
'Yes,' I lied.
'Then why hasn't she come?'
I began to plead, begging him in the name of God not to tell her.
'If you promise this is the last time,' he said, 'I won't say anything to her.'
I promised. But in the end, he never gave the money back to me, nor did he ever mention it to my mother. He kept the secret—and the cash."
"The days passed, and I continued to siphon money from my father's pockets to give to my mother. One day, after I handed her the cash, she asked, 'Was there a lot of money in his pocket today, or just a little?'
'A lot,' I replied.
I needed to use the latrine, so I stepped out into the courtyard. While waiting for my father to finish, I caught a glimpse through the room window; my mother had slipped into my father's room and was reaching into his pockets herself. I thought to myself, *She must be trying to gather the rest of the money for the uniform even faster.*
As my father exited the latrine, I took his place. But calling it a 'latrine' was an overstatement; the stench was suffocating. My mother often fouled the walls, and the reek was unbearable. Sometimes, instead of going in there, I'd simply relieve myself by the garden beds. In her own room, she had a habit of spitting on the wall next to her bedding, later scraping the plaster with a spoon to 'clean' it, as she claimed. Back then, no one stopped to think that perhaps she was ill.
Finally, the last time I handed her the stolen money, I asked, 'So, when are you going to buy my uniform?'
'We haven't gathered enough yet,' she said.
'But you took money from his pockets too!' I countered. 'Buy it with that!'
She looked at me in shock. 'What money?'
'I saw you,' I said. 'I saw you reaching into his pockets right

after me.'
Realizing she'd been caught, she quickly brushed it off. 'No, no... I wasn't taking money. I was just straightening his clothes so he wouldn't realize *you* had taken some. Now, come on, let's head to the bazaar and check the prices.'
The long-awaited day finally arrived. My mother and I headed to the market. We scouted several shops, compared prices, and I tried on different sizes. Eventually, in the cheapest shop we could find, we hit upon a uniform that fit. Even then, my mother kept grumbling, 'It's too expensive.' She was hesitant to pay, but I dug in my heels. 'I'm not taking this off!' I declared.
Reluctantly, she handed over the money. I finally changed out of the uniform so the shopkeeper could wrap it up. As we stepped out, I turned to her and said, 'Now, you have to buy the rest: the braided lanyard and the whistle!'"
"My mother muttered, 'I'm out of money.'
I lost my temper. I threw the uniform at her feet and shouted, 'I gave you all that money! You promised me!' Seeing how devastated I was and realizing I was about to cause a scene in the middle of the bazaar, she quickly relented and promised to buy the rest. I calmed down, and we headed back home.
I waited with bated breath for the sound of my father's key in the lock. When I finally heard it, I yelled, 'Father's home!' My mother whispered, 'Put on the uniform. Go show it to him and tell him *I* bought it for you. Then ask him to buy the lanyard, the whistle, and the shoes.'
Bursting with joy, I dressed up and went to my father. 'Look! Mom bought this for me. Now I just need the rope, the whistle, and the shoes.'
My father looked at me and said, 'This is enough. This uniform is plenty.'
I burst into tears and ran back to my mother. 'He said this is enough!' I sobbed.
My mother, from inside her room, raised her voice so my father could hear: 'If you don't buy them, this boy is never going back to school!'
To my surprise—since I thought they weren't on speaking terms—my father responded immediately to her voice.

'Fine!' he called out. Then he turned to me and said, 'I have those in my own shop. I'll bring them for you tomorrow.' And he kept his word.
The next day, he brought home the special braided lanyard and the whistle. I folded the uniform with the utmost care and placed it right next to my bed, ready to wear it first thing in the morning for school.
The night passed, and in the morning, bursting with excitement, I donned my uniform and headed to school. Along the way, I kept glancing around, convinced that every eye was on me. For the first time, I walked into school in brand-new clothes. I felt like a king! Even the way I walked had changed.
The principal, being a relative, placed me at the very front of the Scout line. Despite being the shortest, he handed me the group's banner. I became the flag-bearer! A surge of pride washed over me; I felt as if the entire world belonged to me. I even slept in that uniform, and wore it to every gathering—it was, by far, the most beautiful thing I owned.
Then came the day of our arithmetic class. 'Today, we are going to learn about money,' the teacher announced. We opened our books. she showed us various banknotes, even pulling a few from her purse: the ten-**Shahi** coin, the one-**Rial**, the two-**Toman** note... she questioned us one by one. Most of the children knew the answers, and so did I. Until, that is, she held up the two-Toman bill. I raised my hand.
'Excuse me, ma'am!'
'Yes?'
'My mother told me that's a one-Toman bill, not two.'
The teacher stepped closer, showing me the note. 'Look carefully. Perhaps your mother was referring to a different one.'
'No!' I insisted. 'It's the exact one you're calling two Tomans. My mother always said it was one.'
'Show the book to your mother,' the teacher suggested gently. 'Perhaps she made a mistake.'
Her words left me deeply unsettled. When I returned from school, my mother was napping, as she always did after lunch. The spread was already laid out; she had prepared my meal. After she woke up, I approached her. 'Today, the

teacher taught us about money. She said we have to practice at home because she’s testing us tomorrow.'
'Good,' my mother replied. 'Go ahead and practice.'
I brought the book over and handed it to her. 'Ask me the questions,' I said, 'see if I know them.'"
She placed her finger on the pictures of the banknotes and began to quiz me. I answered readily:
'Ten **Shahis**... one **Rial**...'
Until she reached the infamous banknote. 'And this one?' she asked.
'That,' I said firmly, 'is the two-**Toman** bill I kept taking from Father’s pocket—the one you always told me was only one Toman.'
A smile spread across her face; she realized I had finally figured it out. As she started to stand up, I stopped her. 'So, who is telling the truth? You or my teacher?'
'Your teacher is right,' she admitted calmly.
'Then you lied to me!' I exclaimed.
'If it weren't for my help,' she countered, 'you wouldn't be wearing that Scout uniform right now.'
'From now on,' I declared, 'I’m not taking any more money from Father’s pockets. What I’ve already taken was more than enough.'
From that day forward, my mother tried to act as if she, too, had stopped raiding my father's pockets. To keep her 'raids' a secret from me, she would send me on a **wild-goose chase**, making up excuses for me to leave the house. I would play along, opening the front door and slamming it shut so she’d think I had gone out to play in the alley. But moments later, I would creep back and watch through the room's glass pane as she went straight for my father’s pockets once again.
"From that day on, my task became even more grueling. I had to be on guard against both my father and my mother, ensuring neither would catch me red-handed as I siphoned money from my father’s pockets. I resorted to pulling night shifts, waiting for the exact moment my father headed to the latrine. When he did, I would shove a large pillow under my quilt to make my mother believe I was fast asleep. Then, I would crawl on my belly out of our room, cross the

veranda, and slip into my father’s quarters to carry out my mission.
But one of those nights, just as I had snatched the money and was about to retreat, I heard the heavy thud of his footsteps approaching the room. With nowhere to run, I had to scramble inside his wardrobe and hide. I stayed huddled there, barely daring to breathe, until his rhythmic snoring assured me he was deep in sleep. Only then did I creep out of the wardrobe.
Escaping the room, however, was an ordeal in itself. The ancient doors, with their parched and rusted hinges, would emit a piercing groan at the slightest nudge. I had to ease the door open with agonizing slowness to avoid waking him. Entering our own room required the same painstaking effort, with the added fear that my mother might bolt upright at any sound.

Corporal Punishment and the Bastinado in School

"At our school, there was a tiny room run by the janitor, Agha Reza. He sold sandwiches, sweets, **Madar Biscuits**, and even soda bottles filled with **sour cherry juice**.
Since I was 'wealthy,' I had plenty of friends. We used to hold sour cherry juice drinking contests; whoever could chug an entire bottle in one go won, and the loser had to foot the bill. I was usually the victor.
Gradually, we made the stakes higher. We agreed that the true champion was whoever could finish two bottles in one breath—with a whole sour cherry inside each one. Later, it escalated to the point where we were eating oranges with the peel, bitter oranges with the skin, and even raw eggplants; and once again, I would come out on top!
This led me to form a gang in school and become its leader. We would pick fights with the older boys just to **put them in their place**. After every brawl, I would treat my followers to free sour cherry juice.

Those who took a beating from us would go to the school proctor to complain. As a result, at least once a week, I was struck on the palms with a ruler or strapped into the **Bastinado** (the *Falak*)."

This meant I had to lie on my back on the ground. The school janitor would
then hold my feet up, and the proctor would strike the soles of my feet with the **Bastinado** (the *Falak*) until I cried out, 'I was wrong, I won't do it again!' This routine would repeat every day or two; in fact, if a few days passed without it, everyone was surprised.
One day, three older boys ganged up on me, but I managed to hold my own against all of them. They went and complained to the proctor, who, being accustomed to such reports, said, 'It’s too late today, but prepare yourself for tomorrow. You will be punished in front of all the students to **serve as a lesson** to the others.'
That day, as I walked home in my rubber boots, it was pouring rain. One of the boots had a hole, and the rainwater had soaked all the way to the bottom. When I got home, I couldn't pull them off my feet. My sister came to help, tugging one off with great effort. As soon as it came off, such a foul stench erupted that she instinctively smacked me on the head and cried, 'You reek of filth!' She refused to help with the other one. I struggled to get the second boot off myself, but I didn't have the heart to wash them.

Stinking and damp, I put them back on the next morning and headed to school.
During the morning assembly, the proctor called me to the front. I stepped forward, trembling with fear. He turned to the students and announced, 'This boy fought yesterday; today he will taste the cane.' Then he barked at me, 'Take off your boots!' I sat on the ground, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get them off. At the proctor's signal, Agha Reza stepped in and yanked one boot off. The moment it came off, a horrific odor filled the air. I thought I might be lucky and that the proctor would change his mind."
But the proctor, who seemed to have encountered such tricks before, looked at me with a self-righteous glint in his eye and said, 'Nice try, but you're not getting away with it!' Holding his nose, he helped Agha Reza yank off the second boot. He then barked at the janitor, 'Go get a long pole; let's bind his feet so we can finish the **Bastinado**.' They brought the pole and tied my feet securely to it. While holding their breaths, they laid into my soles with such ferocity that I could no longer feel my own feet. They seemed to take a grim pleasure in it, as if performing a sacred duty: disciplining a rebellious child. Even the rainwater in my boots hadn't saved me. Gradually, I had grown as accustomed to the cane as they had to caning me. It felt as though there was no difference between school and home; in both places, force was the only tool of 'education.'
This hierarchy of power was everywhere. It started with the class monitor and went up to the teacher, the principal, the proctor, and even the school janitor. When you opened your textbooks, this hierarchy began on the very first page with the portrait of 'His Majesty, the Shahanshah Aryamehr,' followed by Empress Farah, and then Prince Reza Pahlavi. At home, the hierarchy was just as rigid: my father was the absolute power, then my mother, then my eldest brother, then my sister... and finally, me. As the youngest and weakest, I was always the most to blame in everyone's eyes. Anyone who had power over me would vent their frustrations on my head. I was expected to obey everyone. Since I had no place to assert myself at home, I acted out at school to get noticed—to make everyone see me. Yet, even as a child, I operated against the established order. I never

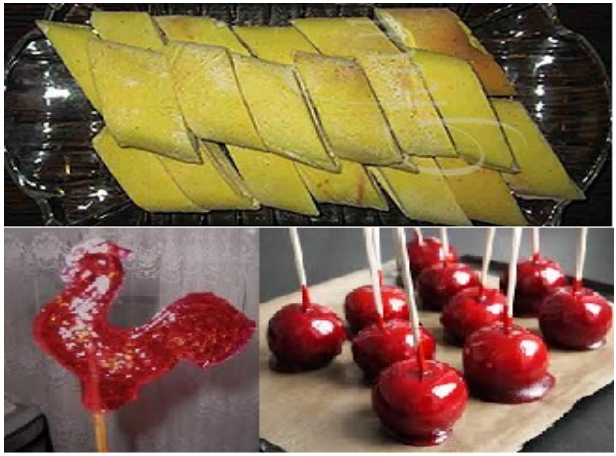
fought those weaker than myself; instead, I clashed with the bullies and those older than me. Because of this, the weaker kids liked me and felt safe around me. Sometimes, they would even share their sweets and chocolates with me. Slowly, I learned to defend myself at home as well. I even started standing up to my sister, who was two years older. It was almost comical; she would get so exhausted from hitting me that she would eventually burst into tears and cry out for others to come and help her finish the job."
Meanwhile, my father gradually began to notice that money was missing from his pockets. He suspected only my mother was taking it; he had no idea that I was a thief as well. He started monitoring his cash closely, even tucking his trousers under his pillow at night. This meant my financial situation fell into total disarray.
Sometimes, during recess, I didn't even have enough money to buy anything from the school canteen. Once, Agha Reza gave me credit, but later he warned, 'I won't give you any more credit until you pay off your debt.' I was forced to find a way out. And I found that solution by stealing from the pockets of the wealthy kids at school.

Stealing Beyond the Home Walls

One day, a group of students was playing volleyball in the schoolyard. They had hung their jackets on the wall hooks. Without any intention of playing, I took off my own jacket and placed it over the coat of one of the wealthy kids. He had taken his wallet out of his trouser pocket and tucked it into his jacket.
A few minutes later, pretending to fetch my own coat, I approached his. I reached into his pocket, snatched the wallet, slipped it into mine, put my jacket on, and quietly slipped out of the school. I headed toward a neighborhood called **Khaahar-Emam**.
As I navigated the back alleys, I emptied the wallet's contents. I pocketed the cash and tried to toss the empty wallet onto a rooftop, but it fell back down. Just as I leaned over to throw it again, the father of one of my classmates

spotted me—and he later reported the incident to the principal.
The next day, I was sitting in class when Agha Reza arrived and asked the teacher for permission to take me to the office. On the way, he asked, 'What did you do to make a parent file a complaint against you?' It was then that the gravity of the situation hit me. 'I don't know!' I replied, bracing myself for the worst.
We entered the office. The man who had seen me in the alleys of Khaahar-Emam was sitting there. I greeted him and sat down. The principal—my brother-in-law—stood up and told Agha Reza to return to his duties. Then he looked at me: 'Do you know this gentleman?' 'No,' I said. 'Didn't you see him yesterday? In the alleys?' 'No, I wasn't in that area at all.'
The man spoke up: 'I saw you with my own eyes; you were trying to throw a wallet onto a rooftop.'
The principal warned, 'Tell the truth, or tomorrow I will hand you over to the **Bastinado** in front of the entire school.' I burst into tears, sobbing, 'I didn't do anything…' Seeing my tears, the classmate's father felt a pang of pity. 'Never mind,' he said. 'I withdraw my complaint. I don't want to see the boy punished like that.' And with that, he left.
The principal sneered, 'You might have pulled the wool over his eyes, but you can’t fool me.' He stepped forward, grabbed my ear, and twisted it so hard I thought it would tear right off. Then, with his heavy hand, he landed several blows to my head and face. 'You’ve disgraced me in this school!' he panted. 'What sin did I commit to marry into your family?!' My ear was throbbing, burning as if it were on fire.
Despite all the misery, fourth grade came to an end, and summer finally arrived. Throughout the summer, I had to go to my father’s shop every day and play nearby or in the mosque courtyard. This was where the real trouble for my father began. Since I was quicker and tougher than the rest and could take on several at once, whenever we fought, the other boys would end up beaten, running to my father’s shop in tears to complain.

My father would tend to their wounds with cotton and **Mercurochrome**, then give them a piece of candy and say, 'Now, go make peace.' And the very next day, the same cycle would repeat.
To put a stop to these clashes, my father once again set up a wooden crate in front of his shop for me, giving me something different to sell each day: **Turkish Delight**, **Kak** pastries, **rooster-shaped lollipops**, and sometimes 'prize-winner' sweets.



One day, officials from the municipality arrived and told all the shopkeepers that starting tomorrow, nothing should be left outside the shops because they were planning to pave the road with asphalt. The next day, I was forced to carry my box of sweets and walk around the neighborhood to sell them. After finishing my sales, I went a bit further up from my father's shop. There was a small hill there, with a fruit stand on the left and the National Bank (**Bank Melli**) on the right. I sat there watching the municipal workers asphalt the street.
Two workers were each carrying a bucket of tar and a brush, splashing the tar into the potholes. They had run out of tar and came to the hot tar tank on the back of a pickup truck to refill. One worker held the empty bucket under the

valve while the other turned it on. The bucket filled with hot tar, but suddenly, for reasons I didn't understand, they started arguing. The one holding the bucket of scorching tar, oblivious to my presence, flung the bucket toward the hill where I was sitting so he could engage in the fight.
In an instant, a black mass flew toward my face. I instinctively shielded my eyes with my hand and screamed from the intense heat. Only then did the two workers realize what had happened. They both rushed to help me, and someone must have alerted my father. He arrived quickly and saw me with my hand still pressed against my face. At first, he feared I had been blinded, but when he pulled my hand away, he was relieved to see my eyes were unharmed, though my face and clothes were covered in tar and my skin was burning.
I don’t know who the bicycle belonged to, but my father grabbed it, put me on the crossbar, and rushed me home. With my mother’s help, they began washing my face with kerosene, then with soap and water, before applying a red ointment and wrapping it in bandages. My face remained bandaged for several days until they finally removed it, revealing that there was no permanent serious damage. Eventually, the wounds began to heal, but because I kept picking at the scabs to make them go away faster, they left scars on my face. Whenever someone asked, 'What happened to your face?' I would joke and say, 'It’s become a **geographic map**!' Of course, not all the marks were from the tar; some were the results of my sisters' scratches and my many street brawls.
Finally, the road paving was finished, and my little sweet-stand was back in business. As the month of **Muharram** arrived, the mosque began its nightly recitations, and the mourning processions took to the streets. There were several wealthy families in our neighborhood; one of them, the Samiei family, would cook sacrificial pottage (**Ash-e Nazri**) during this month. They would plead with my father to let them pick me up at dawn so I could be the first to dip the ladle into the pot before the food was distributed to the public. For 'borrowing' me, they would even pay me a small fee.

As usual, my mother was displeased and would lash out at my father. He would simply reply, 'It would be a sin to refuse; we must not break people's hearts.'
There was a grocer in our area whose son was my classmate. He was notoriously stingy and never gave credit to anyone; everyone called him '**Ali-Tarke**.' One day, I went to his shop to buy seeds. The shop was quiet. He asked, 'What do you want?' I said, 'Ten **Shahis** worth of sunflower seeds and ten Shahis of chickpeas.' He said, 'Come closer so I can pour them into your pocket.' But since they had finished too quickly last time, I insisted he put them in a paper cone.
Just as he was about to fold the paper, several customers walked in. Since he knew me, he served them first. Every time he tried to get back to me, more customers arrived. Finally, he gave me my seeds, and I left.
That evening, as I was walking home with my father, Ali Agha called out to him. We went over, and he pulled money from his till to give to me. My father was surprised and asked, 'Why are you giving money to my son?'
He replied, 'Your son has a "**light hand**" (is a bringer of luck); whenever someone buys from him or he buys from them, the seller gets lucky. Your son bought from me today, and my daily takings have been better than ever.' He then asked me to come every day and buy something, promising that every evening on my way home, he would give me double my money back.
In short, the business of 'offerings' was booming. My father kept asking people not to bring vows to our house, but it was no use. It reached a point where the sister of the mosque's caretaker would vow one or two kilograms of sweets every time she wanted her daughter to pass an exam or for other favors. Whenever she saw me, she would say, 'I've vowed another two kilos of sweets; please pray for my daughter.' She had made so many vows that her 'debt' of sweets to me had grown to several kilograms.
Until one day, she invited me over for lunch and asked me to forgive her 'sweet-debt.' I told her, 'I never asked you for those sweets; you made the vow yourself. But fine, I forgive the debt.'

What was even more interesting was that she had also 'vowed' her daughter to my eldest brother—offering her hand in marriage without any expectations. However, it seemed one of my brother's friends had taken a liking to the girl, and my brother had simply told her, 'Your daughter is like a sister to me.'
In short, summer was drawing to a close, enrollment had begun, and it was time for me to register for the fifth grade.

Enrolling in the School for the Elite

The Department of Education had established a new school in a neighborhood called **Lab-e Ab**, naming it **Ferdowsi**. My brother-in-law was offered the principalship, which he eagerly accepted. Since the school was brand new and lacked enough students, other schools were asked to transfer four or five students each. Those schools took the opportunity to 'clean house,' sending their most problematic students to this new institution.
The new principal at my old school followed suit. He identified the most troublesome students—with me at the very top of the list—to be transferred. My brother-in-law, who had just managed to rid himself of me, was furious and pleaded with the principal to keep me, but his request was flatly denied.
My mother met with rejection at every school she visited. They all asked the same stinging question: 'If your own son-in-law is a principal, why won't he enroll your son in his own school?' They argued that if my own kin wouldn't take me, why should they? Ultimately, my brother-in-law had no choice but to give in, and I began the fifth grade at his new school.
Since the students were all newcomers from various districts, they naturally formed small gangs of four or five based on their previous schools, each trying to recruit others. The boys from my former school immediately looked to me for their security.

I had promised my brother-in-law to be a 'good boy' and avoid fights. However, because the most rowdy and delinquent kids from across the city were gathered there, everyone mockingly called it the '**School for the Elite**'—though they really meant a school for **thugs**. The neighborhood itself was notorious; drug dealing and the sale of stolen goods were common, and even small children carried pocketknives.

Massive brawls broke out within the very first days. Barely two days into the term, my brother-in-law told me: 'When you come to school tomorrow, stop by my house first and bring my large wooden ruler.' I went and fetched it. On my way back, a group of local delinquents cornered me. A fight ensued, and I took a severe beating before bystanders intervened and pulled me away from under their feet.

My brother-in-law told me, 'One of those who rescued you mentioned that even while you were pinned under their feet, you refused to let go of the ruler; you kept swinging it from below, striking them in their faces.'

The conflict didn't end there; every few days, they would block my path to intimidate me into avoiding that route. However, after several brawls, we eventually—and perhaps inevitably—became friends.

In this new school, I had become the leader of the 'troublemakers' and a protector of the weak. As the saying goes, no one dared to even **look cross-eyed** at anyone in my group. Even the principal would sometimes ask me to mediate disputes between other students, and using my influence, I would bring about a reconciliation.

Ultimately, I managed to pass the fifth grade through a bit of **favoritism**. My brother-in-law, the principal, had no desire to fail me; doing so would not only cause trouble with my mother but would also mean having to endure me for another year.

As luck would have it for my brother-in-law, his school lacked a sixth-grade teacher, and no other public school was willing to accept me as a student. This time, another one of my brothers-in-law, who had a connection at a private (**Melli**) school, managed to get me enrolled there—a school where every student lived in absolute terror of the principal.

Skipping School for the Cinema

On the first day of school, as we were all seated in class, the principal walked in with a young man and introduced him to us. He explained that this man wasn't our permanent teacher but would be covering for a few days until our regular instructor arrived. He urged us to be attentive and then left.

As soon as the principal stepped out, the young teacher began asserting his authority, boasting, 'I don’t tolerate any disruptions during my lessons,' and so on. A few minutes later, while he was writing on the blackboard, the student sitting next to me stood up to grab something. As he went to sit back down, I surreptitiously placed a pen on his seat. The moment he sat on it, his yell pierced the air.

Eager to demonstrate his power on the very first day, the young teacher marched over, grabbed my deskmate by the collar, and tried to throw him out. Distraught, the boy cried out, 'Why are you kicking me out? It’s not my fault! He’s the one who put the pen under me!' Ignoring him, the teacher barked, 'Both of you, get out of this classroom!'

My classmate left, but I remained seated, acting as if I were completely innocent. Enraged, the teacher turned to me and shouted, 'Didn't you hear me?' He lunged forward to grab my collar. In a flash, I grabbed *his* collar instead and physically ushered him out of the classroom. He gave me a look I'll never forget! Realizing this class was no place for him, he went straight to the principal’s office to file a complaint, declaring he would never set foot in that room again.

The principal then entered the class, hurling threats that if such an incident happened again, we would all be expelled. He then appointed one of the class bullies as the monitor until a new teacher could be found. From that day on, every student in class stood in awe of me. Even the monitor, who was twice my size, gave orders to everyone else but never dared to say a single word to me.

For a few days, chaos reigned in our classroom until the principal arrived with a man in his fifties who had the aura of a poet. 'This is your new teacher,' he announced before leaving us to get acquainted. The teacher explained that he would be with us every day until the rest of the faculty was finalized, after which he would visit twice a week.

He asked us to stand one by one and introduce ourselves so he could map out the seating chart in his ledger. He was very strict about this: he drew squares representing the desks and wrote our names inside. Once settled, no one was allowed to switch seats, as it was the only way he could remember who was who.

As the bell rang for recess and we began to file out, I noticed him pulling the class monitor aside. 'Stay behind,' he said. 'I have a word with you.'

The next morning, arriving early, I saw the monitor surreptitiously placing a paper-wrapped parcel into the teacher's desk drawer. When the teacher entered and the monitor called us to attention, the old man scanned the room from end to end, sat down, and immediately reached for the drawer. His face relaxed the moment he saw the sandwich. He told us to be seated and began to eat with great relish.

I realized then that the monitor’s 'special mission' was to provide him with a daily sandwich. Only after he had eaten and reached a state of 'mellow bliss'—he was clearly a man of the pipe (opium)—would he begin reciting poetry and lecturing on literature.

Soon, the list of required textbooks and stationery arrived. We bought the books from local bookstores, but I got my notebooks and pens from my father’s shop, as he sold stationery as well. My books always remained pristine and untouched because I rarely opened them; I had a knack for memorizing whatever the teacher said in class—provided there was some semblance of quiet. But the other kids were rowdy, and they would invariably point the finger at me. More often than not, the teacher would end up kicking me out of the room.

I would leave the classroom and wait for recess to confront those who had lied about me. When I fought with them, the principal would eventually kick me out of the school

altogether. I used to leave my books with the janitor; since I was a loyal customer who regularly bought sandwiches and sodas from him, he agreed to keep my bag. That was why my books always stayed pristine and brand new.

Then, I would head to the cinema. Since I was too young to buy tickets from the booth, I would wait by the exit door for the movie to end and the crowd to pour out. The ticket-taker would then take half the price from me, and I'd slip in through the exit. Later, I told my classmates I had a 'connection' and could get them in for half-price. I would collect the money from several of them, pay the usher, and get my own entry for free.

My teacher began picking on me even when no one complained. One day, while he was eating his sandwich, he caught me looking at him and simply said, 'Get out.' I protested, 'Why? I haven't done anything.' He replied, 'I know, but get out anyway.' That day, I felt deeply humiliated and couldn't sleep that night.

The next day, I brought red chili pepper from home. I told the class monitor, 'The principal wants to see you.' Once he left, I sprinkled the pepper inside the literature teacher's sandwich and slipped out. I followed the teacher back into the classroom so he wouldn't suspect me. I took my seat as he sat behind his desk, opened his sandwich, and began to eat.

Slowly, he felt the burn. He glanced at the monitor and rasped, 'Go get me a glass of water.' But the water didn't help. As the burning intensified, he pulled the sandwich apart and realized someone had loaded it with a massive amount of chili.

The teacher stood up, his eyes burning with fury as he scanned the room. 'Who did this?' he barked. Silence fell over the class; not a soul spoke.

'So, you're not going to tell me? Fine,' he snapped. He ordered the monitor, 'Bring the ruler.' He began moving down the rows, striking each student ten times on the palms, from the first desk to the very last.

Returning to the front, he demanded again, 'I'm asking one more time: who was it?' The confused students cried out, 'What happened? Who did what?' He roared, 'The chili

pepper in my sandwich! Now, who was it?' Everyone pleaded, 'By God, it wasn't us!'
'Very well,' he sneered, 'perhaps twenty lashes each will refresh your memories.' He started the cycle again, hitting the first, second, and third students twenty times each.
By the time he reached the fourth student, the monitor couldn't take it anymore. 'Sir,' he stammered, 'when Mansour came in today, he told me the principal wanted to see me. But when I went to the office, the principal said no. When I got back, Mansour was gone. I think it was him.'
The teacher's gaze locked onto me. 'I should have known,' he hissed. 'Do you have so many supporters, or are they just terrified of you? Fine then, come up here and show us how much of a "hero" you really are.' He then told the rest of the class, 'The rest of you can sit down in peace now.'
He struck my palms twenty times with the ruler. Then he ordered me to stand in the corner on one leg with both arms raised high. As I stood there, I began making funny faces at my classmates, making them burst into laughter. Realizing he was losing control of the room, he barked, 'Get out! From now on, you are barred from my lessons.'
I didn't say a word to my parents. Every day he was scheduled to teach, I would leave my books with the school janitor and head straight to the cinema. Sometimes I would walk out of one theater and into another; there wasn't a single movie in town that I hadn't seen.
Time passed until one day, while walking, I passed a mosque where the sound of Quranic recitation was echoing. A group of people stood by the entrance, including our school principal. I looked at the announcement on the wall and saw my literature teacher's name. I couldn't believe he was dead. I thought to myself, 'He finally paid the price for all the misery he caused me.' Feeling a sense of triumph, I went inside and sat down. They served me coffee. As I looked around while sipping my coffee, I was struck with total shock: there was my teacher, standing in a corner, chatting with another instructor. I froze. He caught my eye and actually smiled at me. 'So much for my luck!' I muttered to myself, leaving the mosque in a sour mood.
One day, due to some disruptions at school, the situation became quite chaotic and I was identified as the main

person responsible. I was disciplined during the morning assembly and then taken to the school office for further punishment.
While I was being disciplined in the office near the coat rack, I managed to move items between the pockets of the teachers' jackets hanging there. I even took a fountain pen from one of them. After I was dismissed, the teachers began to notice their belongings were misplaced or missing. They started questioning each other, wondering how different items ended up in the wrong pockets. They became suspicious of one another, not realizing what had actually happened. Eventually, the situation reached a point where the teachers told me that I was not allowed to attend classes anymore unless I brought my father to school.

The Death of My Eldest Uncle, My Father's Beloved Brother

During this time, my uncle suffered a stroke. My father abandoned his work and his own life to hover around his brother like a butterfly. His eldest brother became his sole thoughts and preoccupation. Before long, my uncle passed away. His death dealt a crushing blow to my father. Life lost all its value for him, and from that day on, he longed for death every single day. The bond between my father and his elder brother was a truly profound, romantic devotion—I have never seen such a deep connection between two brothers.

My uncle was a goldsmith, and my father ran a haberdashery. Every morning, before heading to work, my uncle would visit the **Hajji Bathhouse**, which was near my father's shop in the **Sagharisazan** neighborhood. My father would open his shop early just to catch a glimpse of his brother, waiting for him to stop by after his bath so they could spend a precious half-hour together. Even though my younger uncle's shop was directly across from the bathhouse—much closer than my father's— the bond between these two was on another level. It was their daily ritual; whenever they met, they would embrace and kiss with such devotion that anyone watching would think they had been parted for years. If a day passed without seeing his elder brother, it was a dark day for my father.
The death of my uncle, combined with my mother's behavior toward my father afterward, caused him to lose all will to live. He began to long for death every single day.
My eldest uncle had three grown children from his first wife. When he passed away, he also left behind a two-year-old daughter and a four-year-old son from his second wife. My father tried to step in as a father figure for these children, but my mother firmly opposed this. She constantly leveled accusations against him, claiming that the children were just an excuse to see his brother's widow. My poor father, fearing for his own reputation and that of his sister-in-law, did not dare to visit their home. Instead, while at his shop, he would watch the passersby, hoping to catch a

glimpse of the widow and the orphaned children. He always kept chocolates in his pocket for them. Yet, because of the misery my mother put him through, even when they passed near the shop, he didn't dare to approach them or even stroke his niblings' hair to give them the sweets. He would simply step outside and wave to the children from a distance.

My Father’s Stroke After His Brother’s Passing

It was a Friday evening, not long after my eldest uncle’s burial in the city of Qom, when my father took me to the **Khaahar-Emam Mosque** for the Maghrib and Isha prayers. He knew that after the prayer, the mosque’s leader, **Ayatollah Lakani**, would be giving a sermon. Everything went smoothly until we reached the mosque. My father handed our shoes to the attendant, and we went inside. A large crowd sat waiting for the Imam to arrive. My father performed his Wudu (ablution) and looked at me; I followed suit just to please him. Because it was so crowded, we took our place in the very last row of worshippers.

A few minutes later, Mr. Lakani climbed the pulpit and began to speak softly. It was as if he knew a grieving brother was sitting right there beside me. He began to speak of the bond between Imam Hassan and Imam Hussain. My father, who had just lost his own 'Hussain'—my father’s name was Hassan and my uncle’s was Hussain—burst into tears the moment he heard the name. As the speaker descended from the pulpit, my father was still weeping.

Meanwhile, I was busy searching the pockets of the man sitting next to me, who was completely absorbed in the speech. I had carefully rested the flap of his jacket on my leg so he wouldn't notice the weight shifting as I emptied his pocket. I occasionally fidgeted to make him think I was just a restless child. To my disappointment, there wasn't a single Rial in his pocket. The only thing I felt was a ring—he

must have taken it off during his ablutions. Not wanting my effort to go to waste, I reluctantly took the ring and hid it in my sock. I then shifted again so his pocket slid off my leg and back into place. Fortunately, he didn't notice, though he gave me a look that said, 'Stop squirming!'

The sermon had ended. People were gradually rising and heading toward the shoe repository, but my father remained seated, still weeping. Anxious to leave the mosque as quickly as possible because of the stolen ring, I said, 'Father, everyone is leaving; aren't we going home?' A few acquaintances approached, offering their condolences and urging him to compose himself for my sake. He wiped his tears while looking at me and replied, 'The shoe counter is crowded now; let’s wait until it clears out, then we’ll go.' For the first time, I felt a pang of pity for him. Yet, fearing that the man sitting next to me—who had gone to fetch his shoes—might notice the missing ring and return to look for it, I kept an eye on the exit, waiting for the crowd to thin. Eventually, the repository cleared out. I stood up and said, 'Father, it’s quiet now, please let’s go.' Seeing he had no more excuses to stay, he tried to rise, but it was as if he were bolted to the floor. He couldn't move. At first, I thought he just didn't want to leave. 'Father, please,' I pleaded, 'everyone is gone.' He said softly, 'I know, but I can't get up.'

He asked for my help. I tried to pull him up, but he felt incredibly heavy; no matter how hard I strained, I couldn't budge him. Seeing my struggle, several others came over to assist, and together they managed to lift him. But he couldn't stand straight; he had lost control of his left side. Despite being much shorter than him, I gripped his waist firmly with both hands to help him balance. With someone else’s help, we reached the shoe counter. I fetched his shoes, but he couldn't put them on. I helped him onto a chair so I could struggle to get the shoes onto his feet. Even after that, when I tried to help him stand again, he found it nearly impossible to walk.

The attendant at the shoe repository offered to lend us a cane, provided we return it the next day. With the cane in one hand and the other resting heavily on my shoulder, my

father began to walk, dragging his left leg behind him. He nearly collapsed several times along the way.
With great difficulty, we reached home and I managed to get him to his room. He had leaned on me so hard that I felt as though I had shrunk under his weight, and he was drenched in sweat. I pleaded with my mother to help me undress him, but she refused. With my father's own struggling assistance, I finally managed to get his clothes off. He looked at me, smiled weakly, and with a great effort, leaned down to kiss my head. He asked me to rub his left leg, believing it was just a simple muscle cramp that would fade with a massage. I began rubbing his leg until he finally drifted off to sleep.
The next morning, he still couldn't get up. I went to inform my eldest sister, who was a teacher. She and her husband (the principal) came over, and he went to fetch **Dr. Lesani**, our family physician whose clinic was near our house. After examining him, the doctor confirmed he had suffered a **stroke**. He prescribed some medication, and gradually, my father's condition improved. His friends visited and urged him to reopen his shop. He eventually agreed and returned to work. I started spending more time at the shop, often standing at the entrance to entertain myself by watching the people pass by in the alleyway.
Right next to my father’s shop was a **cobbler** who was always very kind to me. Whenever the weather got warm, he would move his small workbench—used for polishing and repairs—outside his shop against the mosque wall. As people passed by, they would drop off their shoes for a shine or a quick fix. I would often sit beside him, fascinated, watching how he meticulously repaired the shoes."
One day, he said to me, 'If you’d like some tea, go to the teahouse and tell **Haji Ismail** to bring two cups for us.' I went and relayed the message to the teahouse keeper, then returned and stood by the cobbler's side. He was busy hammering a heel onto a shoe while I watched. Suddenly, the hammer slipped from his hand, and he gripped my leg tightly, slowly leaning over his workbench. For a moment, I was terrified. No matter how much I called out, he didn't answer. I made a scene and shouted for help. Several people rushed over, lifted him from the bench, and laid him

on the ground. I saw white foam coming from his mouth; he was no longer moving.
The doctor arrived with an ambulance, but it was too late. He confirmed the cobbler had suffered a **stroke**. This was grim news for my father, who had only recently reopened his shop. They carried him into the mosque with prayers (**Salawat**) and notified his family. It was decided he would remain in the mosque overnight until he could be buried the following morning. They asked a Quran reciter to stay by his side until dawn, but the man was terrified that the dead might 'come back to life' in the middle of the night. Being just a child, I agreed to stay with the reciter late into the night so he wouldn't be afraid. That night, I was actually more frightened by the look on the reciter's face than I was of the deceased.

Stealing from My Father's Neighbor

After the kind cobbler passed away, his brother took over the shop. He wasn’t a skilled cobbler; he could only shine shoes. To make a living, he began selling cigarettes, matches, and biscuits. He was incredibly ill-tempered. If I stood near my father’s shop and even a few centimeters of my shadow or a corner of my clothes drifted toward his storefront, he would barge out, shove me away, and bark, 'Don't you dare stand in front of my shop!' We were locked in a silent feud, and I loathed him. I was just biding my time to strike back.
One day, I arrived to find a large truck parked in front of both shops. My father wasn't there; he had simply leaned a wooden pole across the entrance—the traditional sign that the shopkeeper is temporarily away. I glanced at the ill-tempered neighbor’s shop and saw that he was gone too. I seized the moment. I slipped into my father’s shop, grabbed a large sack, and darted into the neighbor’s store. I cleared out his entire stock of cigarettes and matches—everything from **Winston**, **Kent**, and **Marlboro** to local brands like **Oshno-e Vizheh** and **Homa Filter**. I hauled the sack

behind the **Agha Seyyed Abbas Mosque** and hid it under an upturned water tank sitting atop a large tomb.
I then went inside the mosque and peered through the windows to watch the fallout. Soon, the truck drove away. The owner returned, stepped inside, and moments later burst out screaming, 'Thief! Thief!' before collapsing in a faint. Neighbors rushed to revive him. When they asked what happened, he claimed they had stolen all his cigarettes, matches, and cash. He was lying about the money—I hadn't taken a single coin. If I had seen any, I certainly would have.
My father arrived, and only then did I find the courage to leave the mosque and stand by his side. My father was consoling him, telling him not to worry. He asked, 'How much do you think was stolen?' The man replied, 'I'm not sure, I have to calculate.' Eventually, he told my father the loss was about two thousand **Tomans**. As usual, my father took his book of charity receipts from the shop, made his rounds through the bazaar to collect donations from other merchants, added some of his own money, and handed it to the man.
He was thrilled that his shop had been robbed because he had lied about losing two thousand **Tomans**, whereas my own count of the stolen cigarettes wouldn't have even totaled a thousand. The most expensive ones were the **Winstons**, which cost four Tomans including a pack of matches, and there weren't even a hundred packs. The rest were much cheaper brands.
I didn't touch the stash for a few days until things settled down. Then, slowly, I started smoking them. Every hour or so, I would slip behind the mosque, retrieve a cigarette from under the water tank, and sit atop one of the large tombs to smoke.
While spending time behind the mosque, I noticed two particular tiles on the back wall, each measuring about 25 by 25 centimeters. They were set about two meters apart and were roughly half a meter above the ground. They looked ancient, with no inscriptions on them, and no one seemed to know what lay behind them.
Whenever I went back there to smoke, I used a knife I had hidden behind the mosque to slowly chip away at the

mortar around those tiles. Finally, I managed to pry one of them loose from the wall.

My Secret Hideout Inside the Tomb

I saw a large hole behind the tile, but it was too dark to see anything inside. I rolled up a newspaper and lit it as a makeshift torch to explore the darkness. I could only see a meter or two ahead, but I was consumed by curiosity. In Rasht, most buildings were raised about a meter off the ground due to the humidity, leaving a hollow crawlspace beneath. Our house had one, and I assumed this was simply the mosque's undercroft.
From that day on, I moved my stash of cigarettes into that hole. Later, it became the hiding place for everything I found or stole. Eventually, I grew bold enough to squeeze through the opening myself; it became my secret sanctuary, a place where no one else dared to venture.
One freezing day, I brought a pile of newspapers inside. I twisted them tightly so they would burn slower and give me more light to explore. As the flames flared up, I realized I was in a vast underground chamber. Being small for my

age, I could walk upright quite comfortably. However, the place was draped in thick cobwebs, and giant rats scurried away into the shadows at the sight of the light.

I cautiously stepped forward when my foot struck something shaped like a ball. I lowered the flame to see what it was. To my absolute horror, I found myself staring at a human skull. A paralyzing fear gripped my entire being; I stood frozen until the searing heat of the burning paper reached my fingers. I dropped the flame, and it went out, leaving me in absolute darkness surrounded by human skeletons and gargantuan rats. The only thing I could see was the faint sliver of light coming from the edges of the tile.

I crawled back toward that light, pushed the tile aside, and ran home. Determined to conquer my fear so I could sleep that night, I fashioned a crude lamp out of a metal can, some kerosene, and a lantern wick. I returned to the hole that same day.

I shook the can to soak the wick and lit it. The steady flame allowed me to see much clearer. As I advanced, I saw human skeletons laid out on the ground, spaced about a meter apart. It was my first time seeing human remains that hadn't been buried under soil. I was filled with a mixture of profound wonder and chilling dread.

I kept moving forward. I had counted about six or seven skeletons when my head struck one of the ceiling beams, which was hanging down due to rot. I thought to myself: What if the ceiling collapses and I am buried alive right here, just like these skeletons? Fear stopped me from venturing any further, and I retreated.

One evening, while it was dark and I was safely tucked away in my hideout smoking a cigarette, I noticed our local beggar enter the cemetery. He went to a corner and sat down. At first, I thought he was just relieving himself. For a moment, I considered jumping out of the hole to scare him, but as I watched closely, I realized he was digging into the ground. It wasn't long before he left.

After he departed, I went to investigate but couldn't find anything. I figured he might return tomorrow, so I decided to keep a close watch to see exactly where he was digging.

The next day, I waited for him inside my hole. Sure enough, the beggar reappeared and went to the exact same spot. He scanned his surroundings before he began excavating the earth; it was clear he had hidden something there. After a few minutes, he left again.

I went back to the spot after he was gone, but since it was dark, I couldn't find a thing. I didn't dare light a flame, as others might notice. The following day, in the daylight, I returned and identified exactly where the soil had been disturbed. I placed a tiny piece of wood on the loose earth to see if it would be moved.

The day after that, I saw it had been displaced. Since people were passing by, I walked casually past the spot until I reached the opening of my hideout. When night fell, I went to the location, cleared the soil, and hit a square brick. I lifted the brick and discovered a small pouch underneath.

I took the pouch into my hideout and lit my handmade lamp. To my surprise, the bag was filled with a large amount of money. My first instinct was to take all of it and throw the bag away, but after some thought, I decided to take only a small portion and put the rest back. I wanted him to remain unaware that his hiding place had been discovered so he would continue to store his money there.

In short, I put the money pouch back in its place. I had guessed correctly; he never realized that his secret stash had been tampered with.

I used to take a portion of his money once a week, but eventually, he caught on and moved his stash. My supply of stolen cigarettes gradually ran out too, and with no money to buy more, I was forced to scavenge half-smoked butts from the mosque's ashtrays.

Sometimes, when people arrived for the noon prayer, I would look after their shoes, and some would tip me for it. I'd tell them the official shoe-keeper had asked me to watch over things until he returned. Once, while the shoe-keeper was fast asleep with his mouth wide open, snoring loudly, my friends egged me on to drop a sugar cube into his mouth. The poor man nearly choked; God truly had mercy on us that day.

After that incident, he started sleeping on his side, using a small wooden stool called a '**Katal**' instead of a pillow. He

would fall into such a deep trance that we could actually slide the stool out from under his head, and his head would remain suspended in mid-air without falling. We would then slide the stool back into place.

To fund my habit, I would go to a grocer who knew my father and tell him I needed five cigarettes for the mosque caretaker. My smoking habit made me a frequent fixture at the mosque. The caretaker wasn't happy about my presence, but since my father was on the board of trustees, he couldn't say much to me.

Whenever he wanted to get rid of me, he'd send me on a **wild-goose chase**. He'd give me money and say, 'Go to the far end of the bazaar and buy me a hundred grams of **Siahmazgi cheese** from so-and-so.' I'd agree because he gave me five Rials—three for the cheese and two as a tip for me. His sister, who sometimes filled in for him, would do the same. She'd send me for cheese, then disappear into the inner shrine and lock the door. This usually happened between 2:00 and 4:00 PM when the mosque was deserted.

However, I grew suspicious. I wondered why they constantly needed fresh cheese every time they saw me, instead of just buying a larger supply at once.

I began to wonder: why didn't they just buy a week's worth of cheese at once to avoid tipping me every day? And why did they always insist on that specific shop at the far end of the bazaar, when there were three other grocers nearby who also sold **Siahmazgi** cheese?

One day, the caretaker's sister gave me money for the cheese. I took it, left the mosque, and headed toward the courtyard latrines to chat with the one-legged attendant. I glanced back to see if the shrine door was locked, only to realize she was watching me from the mosque window.

I had no choice but to start walking down the courtyard steps so she'd think I was off on my errand. After a few minutes, I doubled back. Seeing the shrine door was now shut, I rushed inside and flung it open. I caught her pressed against a corner of the **Zarih** (the ornate lattice surrounding the tomb). When she saw me, a small stick she was holding slipped and fell inside the enclosure. Panicked, she asked, 'Weren't you supposed to be buying cheese?'

I replied coolly, 'I went, but it was closed. I can go somewhere else if you like.'
I wanted her to think I hadn't realized she was fishing money out of the shrine. From then on, I started marking certain banknotes that people threw inside. By the next day, they would invariably be gone.
Whenever the board of trustees noticed the shrine was getting full, they would organize a collection. Since I was small and a **Sayyid**, they would ask me to squeeze through the tiny access door to gather the offerings. They'd give me a large white sheet, and I would pile everything—money, letters, and written prayers—into it and hand it over. Afterward, I would wash the tombstone with rosewater before climbing out. While they counted the loot—one person for bills, another for coins—one of them found a pencil with a lump of **Saqqez** (natural resin/chewing gum) stuck to its tip. He held it up and said, 'It looks like someone has been fishing money out of here.'
As a result, they decided to encase the entire lattice with glass, leaving only a twenty-centimeter gap at the very top so people could still toss in their offerings while blocking the way for the thieves.

The Incident in the Mosque's Latrine

In our mosque, there was a massive heater fashioned out of a 220-liter oil drum. During the harsh winters, people would huddle around it in a tight circle to catch some warmth.

This heater ran on firewood. Whenever the heat began to fade, the circle of people huddled around it would draw closer and closer. But when fresh logs were tossed in and the fire roared to life, the intense heat would push the circle outward again.

Sometimes, the sight of the flames would remind people of the fires of Hell. They would turn to one another and ask, 'How will sinners ever endure such agony?' They would raise their hands toward the heavens, pleading for God’s forgiveness.

I was responsible for the heater. Whenever we ran out of wood, I would take a wicker basket to the woodpile, which was kept inside a private latrine reserved for the mosque’s board of trustees. This latrine was always kept locked, and the key remained with the caretaker.

One day, I went to the caretaker and said, 'Give me the key so I can fetch some wood.' He glanced at the hook where the key usually hung and said, 'The key isn't here; someone must have taken it.' Then, peering out into the courtyard, he added, 'The door to the private latrine is open; go ahead and get the wood from there.'

I took the empty basket and headed to the courtyard. I pushed the main door of the latrine, which was already ajar, further open. Inside were three stalls: two were packed

with firewood, and one was functional. Someone was inside the functional stall, though I had no idea who.
I went to the woodpile and began filling my basket. Suddenly, I saw someone exit the stall. I turned around and saw a man who was seemingly a respectable person—a friend of my father's, a member of the board of trustees, whom everyone held in high esteem. He was exposing himself to me, staring at me with a smile on his face. Shocked by what was happening, I dropped the wood and quickly ran out of the area to seek help and alert others. I began shouting to draw attention to the situation and confront the individual's behavior.
With a pale face and a self-righteous air, he said, 'You are like my own child.' When I told my father, he was actually upset with me for supposedly ruining the man's reputation. He took the man's side, insisting, 'He is a good man.' But from that day on, every time I saw him, I felt a wave of nausea.
He lived in our neighborhood and had a son and a daughter. Our families were friends, but I never set foot in their house again. My heart bled for his children for having such a father, yet no one believed me—except for his wife. One day, she told me, 'You were telling the truth. I know what a foul person my husband is, but for the sake of the children, I am forced to stay with him.' She begged me not to tell anyone, and I gave her my word.
A few months passed until I heard he had been caught while molesting another child. His family suffered greatly and was eventually forced to pack up and move out of the neighborhood.
As time went by, my father's health deteriorated. My mother's constant nagging took a toll, and he began neglecting his medication—a silent way of showing he no longer had the will to live. His condition worsened to the point where he could no longer go to the shop. I stayed home more often, occasionally helping him go to the bank to withdraw money. Sometimes he went to the **Saderat Bank** branch at the **Iraq Bridge** (Pol-e 'Iraq) roundabout. The bank staff treated him with great respect; they would sit beside him and offer him tea and sweets. My father trusted them implicitly; he would hand over his passbook

and say, 'I want to withdraw two thousand **Tomans**.' They would process a withdrawal for two thousand from his account but only hand him fifteen hundred. My father would pocket the money without ever counting it."
One day, when I accompanied my father to the bank, I dropped him off near the entrance and told him, 'Wait here until I return to help you back home.' When we got back, I asked him, 'How much did you withdraw?'
'Two thousand,' he replied. I counted the cash and realized it was only fifteen hundred. 'But this is only fifteen hundred!' I exclaimed. 'They shortchanged you!' He simply sighed and said, 'They are good people; perhaps it fell out of my pocket on the way.'
I told my eldest sister. My brother-in-law checked my father’s passbook and discovered that he had visited the bank four times in a single month, withdrawing two thousand each time—even though our household expenses didn't even reach one thousand a month. Furthermore, my mother was also secretly taking the remaining money from his pockets every single day.
Eventually, we decided that one of us should always accompany him to the bank, and the money should be handed directly to my mother the moment he got home, just to keep track of where it was all going.
My father’s health continued to decline until he could no longer leave the house. At the insistence of my brother, who was five years older than me, my father handed the shop over to him. My brother sold all the original stock and turned the business into an electrical supply store. My father was constantly distressed by this; he would say that every time he visited the shop, he found my brother eating luxury **Chelow Kabab**, spending far more than the shop was actually earning.
Ultimately, my father took the shop back from him. With the help of some friends in Tehran, he managed to secure a job for my brother at a construction company instead.
At that time, my eldest brother was living in the city of **Qazvin**, and two of my sisters had already gotten married. Another one of my sisters was in Tehran, studying nursing.

I was living in our family home with my parents and the sister who was twenty months older than me.

A Confrontation with a Judge during the Shah’s Era

One day, one of my classmates was deeply distressed. When I asked why, he told me he had lost his birth certificate and was terrified his father would kill him if he found out. I told him not to worry: 'One of my brother’s friends works at the Civil Registry office. I’ll go there before school tomorrow and explain your situation; maybe he can help.'
The next morning, I arrived at the Civil Registry an hour early, but the office hadn't opened yet. With my books tucked behind my back, I began pacing the street. After walking up and down a few times, I turned into a nearby alley and sat on the steps of a newly built house to rest.
A few minutes later, the door swung open. A large, imposing man with a fedora, a goatee, a heavy overcoat, and a cane stood over me. He tapped me with his cane and barked, 'What are you doing here?'
'As you can see, I’m sitting,' I replied.
As he prepared to leave, he snapped, 'Get up and get out of here.'
I was exhausted and had only just sat down. 'Look at all this space,' I said. 'If you want to go, then go.'
'This is my house,' he retorted. 'You have to leave.'
Stubbornly, I shot back, 'I’m not going to eat your house! I’m tired and I’m sitting here.'
He tapped me with his cane again. 'Did you run away from home?'
'What’s it to you?' I challenged. 'Are you a lawyer or do you own this whole neighborhood?'
'Actually, I am a lawyer and I own this house,' he said. 'Now get lost before I call the police.'
Thinking he was bluffing, I said, 'I’m not moving. Do whatever you want.'

He tapped me again. 'There was a robbery in this area last night. Was it you?'
'Have you no shame?' I replied. 'Accusing me of theft?'
'Stay there if you dare,' he warned.
'I'll stay right here to see what you're going to do,' I replied.
He went inside and slammed the door. A few minutes later, he peeked out and said, 'Sit there as long as you like until the guard arrives.'
'If a policeman has to come just because I'm sitting on a step,' I scoffed, 'they'd be busy all day long doing nothing else.'
Before I could finish my sentence, a police car screeched to a halt at the entrance of the alley. Two officers stepped out. I realized then he wasn't bluffing; he had actually called the precinct. The officers approached, looking around for the 'troublemaker.' When they reached us, one of them smiled, assuming I was the man's son. They gave him a military salute and apologized for being late, thinking the 'criminal' had fled.
'No,' the man said, pointing at me. 'The criminal is right here, sitting on the steps.'
The officers were stunned. 'This kid?'
'Yes, this kid,' he insisted.
The officer turned to me. 'Why are you bothering this gentleman? What are you doing here?' They didn't even give me a chance to speak; they grabbed my arm, forced me into the car, and sped off toward the police station.
Inside the station, I was taken to the officers' breakroom and told to wait until my fate was decided. A few officers were arguing with a woman who had turned to prostitution out of poverty; one officer was even whispering a private address to her. One of them turned to me and asked mockingly, 'What are you here for? Pickpocketing, theft, or did you run away from home?'
'None of the above,' I replied. 'Someone just didn't like the look of me and called the police.'
He laughed. 'Sure, the precinct is always full of innocent people.'
The officer who had arrested me walked in. 'Do you have any idea who you bothered?'
'Look, just let me go,' I said. 'I'm late for school.'

He chuckled. 'Forget school. You're going to be "drinking cool water" (serving time) here for a while.'
'Why? what did I do?'
'Nothing much,' he said, 'except you picked the wrong target this time. The man who filed the complaint against you is a Military Prosecutor. Unless he gives his consent, you aren't going anywhere.'
After a while, the sergeant on duty summoned me. When I entered his office, I saw the lawyer sitting behind the sergeant's desk while the officer stood respectfully at attention. The guard whispered to me, 'Go kiss the gentleman's hand and apologize; maybe he'll show some greatness and forgive you.'
'I haven't done anything to apologize for,' I stated firmly.
The sergeant dismissed the guard and tried to pressure me again, but I stood my ground. 'The one who should apologize is him,' I said, pointing at the lawyer. 'He insulted me and struck me with his cane. I'm the age of his grandson; I feel sorry for his own children if this is how he treats people.'
The sergeant turned red with rage. He grabbed my neck and barked, 'Shut up or I'll choke you! A brat shouldn't talk back to his elders.'
The lawyer intervened before things turned violent. He asked which school I attended, the name of my principal, and why I had been sitting in front of his house. I told him the whole story. He asked the sergeant to call the school to verify my words. After the call, the lawyer turned to me: 'Since you told the truth, you may go. Just stay away from my doorstep.'
'You should apologize for the way you insulted me,' I countered.
He laughed. 'What an insolent brat you are! Now get lost.'
As I was leaving, the sergeant barked, 'Wait, what are you hiding behind your back?'
'My schoolbooks,' I replied.
He glared at me. 'You're lucky the lawyer forgave you. Otherwise, I would have brought such a calamity upon you that even the birds in the sky would weep for your soul.'
He then turned to the lawyer with a bow of gratitude. I walked out of there, but I never forgot the face of that man.

Selling Household Items and Gambling

This happened when I met a classmate who was into gambling. A few times, I accompanied him to a place we called the '**Backpack**' (Kuleh-Poshti). It was a roofless, four-walled enclosure where street sweepers dumped trash from several neighborhoods. Behind the walls of this dump, my classmate and a few others would gamble. Every day, scavengers would sift through the refuse, hoping to find copper or aluminum to make a living, disturbing the swarms of flies and mosquitoes that, in turn, pestered us. One day, I felt tempted and joined the game. As luck would have it, I won their money. Two of them were sons of our local mosque's preacher, and another was the son of a cleric. Like me, they were constant truants. Later, at their fathers' insistence, they went to the seminary in Qom to become clerics and even urged me to join them.

I remember once our essay topic was 'What do you want to be when you grow up?' I first wrote '**Entertainer**' (Motreb), but then crossed it out and wrote '**Cleric**.' I had a talent for mimicry; whenever I returned from the cinema, I would reenact the entire movie with the actors' gestures. I even imitated the songs and moves of **Fardin** and **Beyk Imanverdi**. After returning from the mosque, I would mimic the preachers. My father would laugh so hard he couldn't control himself and would sometimes wet himself; of course, I'd have to change his clothes.

We always gambled behind that trash dump to stay hidden. The games were either '**Qap-bazi**' (knucklebones), dice, or '**Kesh-be-Divar**' (coin tossing against a wall)—wherever the coin landed closest to the wall, that person won. At first, I was on a winning streak. But then the tables turned, and I started losing. It's an unwritten rule of gambling: when you're a novice, luck smiles on you, but the more you learn, the more you lose. I fell victim to that very fate.

I had no money left for gambling, so I began borrowing from others, only to lose that too. Desperation drove me to start selling our household items. I began with the copper pots, which I sold for a pittance at the second-hand market in the **Khaahar-Emam** neighborhood. I used the proceeds first to settle my debts, then gambled with whatever remained. When I lost, I borrowed again. My lenders were all too happy to oblige; they knew that if I weren't in debt, I might eventually quit the game out of poverty.

After the copper pots, it was the turn of the aluminum ware and anything else I could get my hands on. Sometimes, at gatherings, if I found a small object that could fit in my pocket, I would snatch it. Once, while we were at my uncle’s house, I took a small glass figurine from the mantelpiece and hid it in the courtyard, so that if they searched me, they wouldn't find it. When they noticed it was missing, the adults assumed the children had taken it for a game. My father questioned me, but I insisted I hadn't seen a thing. My uncle then announced: 'Whoever finds the figurine and returns it to me will receive a five-Rial reward.' That night, because the tension was high and everyone was suspicious of me, I couldn't retrieve the figurine from its hiding spot before we left with my father and siblings.

Two or three days later, I returned to my uncle’s house; during the day, his door was usually left open. After greeting my aunt, I went into the yard on the pretext of picking fruit. I retrieved the figurine from beside the tree where I had hidden it and triumphantly told her: 'Auntie, I found the missing figurine!' Overjoyed, she said, 'I'll get the five Rials from your uncle tonight. Come back tomorrow for your reward.'

That was the first time I had sold a stolen item back to its owner, and the first time both the seller and the buyer were satisfied with the deal. After collecting the money, I headed straight to the gambling spot, paid back my two-Rial debt, and started playing with the remaining three.

I threw the dice: seven. The other guy threw: six. Suddenly, the referee struck the dice with his stick, and the number changed to nine. 'You cheated! I don’t accept this!' I shouted. A brutal fight broke out; it was three against one. They beat me as hard as they could, but I didn't back down;

even while pinned under their feet, I kept swinging. One of them said, 'Fine, let's roll again.' I paused and thought: So, this is how these scoundrels have been bleeding me dry with their tricks.
I threw my last two Rials at their feet and said, 'Cursed be I if I ever touch a die again!' Realizing they were losing their business with my departure, they tried to lure me back: 'You're right; we made a mistake. Here, take your money and let's keep playing.' I simply said, 'Goodbye,' and walked away. I never gambled with them again. Even when they cornered me later, offering to lend me money, I'd say, 'I have money, but I'm not playing.'
Whenever I passed that spot, they would taunt me, jeering, 'His mommy won't let him play with us.' They wanted to provoke me, but I managed to stand by my decision and never gambled again. Most days, after school, I would go to the mosque and work as the shoe-keeper during prayers to earn enough money for my cigarettes..

The Bitter Accusation My Mother Leveled Against Me

Across from my father's shop stood a shrine and mosque known as **Agha Seyyed Abbas and Agha Seyyed Esmail**. During the months of Muharram and Safar, my late eldest uncle, **A-Mir Hossein**, would stand by the entrance with a rosewater sprinkler, perfuming the hands of everyone who entered. My eldest brother, **Ramin**, worked in the large shoe-repository section with his friends. My middle brother, **Torab**, was occasionally in charge of the microphones; he had to adjust the stand in front of the clerics on the pulpit and remove it once the sermon ended. However, he was never disciplined; he came and went as he pleased, often leaving me to take over his responsibilities. Two of the popular elegists were brothers known to the public as the **Aghili Brothers**. Though illiterate, they were **Sayyids**, and the women held them in high esteem, believing their ancestral spirit was 'fierce' (**Jadd-e Tond**).

They always performed as a duo: the elder brother on the pulpit and the younger sitting one step below, chanting and wailing in harmony. When the mourning ritual concluded, women would hand them pieces of fabric to bless by touch or glasses of water for them to blow into, believing it would heal their sick. Some weren't satisfied with just a breath and insisted the brothers spit into the water for a faster cure. It seemed they truly found healing, as the requests only grew day by day.

On the days of **Tasua and Ashura**, the number of glasses became so overwhelming that the brothers couldn't keep up. They would pass some of the glasses to me as I stood by the pulpit, knowing I too was a **Sayyid**. I would simply blow into them and hand them back. However, I had little desire to stay by the pulpit; I preferred helping out in the mosque’s teahouse. My job was breaking sugar loaves. During Muharram and Safar, I would break fifteen to twenty—sometimes even thirty—kilograms of sugar a day. Whether it was the hard Russian sugar or large conical loaves, I had become so skilled that I broke almost every piece into perfect cubes. People would often gather around just to watch me work.

On the nights of **Tasua and Ashura**, I would stay at the mosque until late, as many people traveling from other towns would sleep in the courtyard to secure a good spot for the morning ceremonies. Sometimes we slept there too, just so we could wake up at dawn to spread the straw mats across the courtyard.

People arrived very early to claim spots for themselves and their families. I, along with two others, was responsible for serving tea in the women’s section. We had to be quick—serving the tea and immediately collecting the empty glasses to keep up with the crowd. I had become a professional at this; sometimes I would stack three trays, each carrying twenty-five glasses and saucers, and navigate through the sea of people. I had to hold the trays high above my head so they wouldn't collide with anyone, especially those who might suddenly stand up.

I can honestly say those were my best days—Tasua, Ashura, the Fortieth (**Arbaeen**), and the Night of Strangers (**Sham-**

e Ghariban). Being in the heart of that massive crowd, I never felt a single moment of exhaustion.

I remember it was the night of Ashura. We were planning to sleep at the mosque when my father arrived and asked me to come home to sleep. I told him, 'You know I have to be here at dawn to lay out the mats.' With a look of deep distress, he said, 'I know, but your mother won't let me sleep unless you come home.' Seeing his pain, I reluctantly agreed but made him promise to wake me up early enough to return to the mosque.

I lay down in the bed my mother had prepared, counting the minutes until dawn. Suddenly, my mother lunged at me with a wooden stick, unleashing a torrent of foul insults and vile accusations. I scrambled away, grabbed my shoes, and ran into the courtyard to escape, only to find she had locked the main gate to trap me. She continued to chase me with the stick. Out of options, I ran back inside and leaped through a small window high above the mantelpiece, fleeing back to the mosque.

Shortly after, my father appeared at the mosque again, begging me to return because my mother was still tormenting him. I said, 'I listened to you and came home, and you saw how she beat me.' Heartbroken, he pleaded one more time: 'Please, come back. If she tries to fight you, come sleep beside me so she can't reach you.' My father had suffered a stroke and was in poor health; I knew she was putting him under immense pressure. I accepted his word and followed him home once more.

When I entered the house, my mother erupted in a fit of shouting, forcing me to seek refuge in my father’s room for the night. Early the next morning, while everyone was still asleep, I slipped away to the mosque to help the others. We ate breakfast together and began laying out the straw mats. By the afternoon, when the mosque grew quiet, I returned home to change my clothes.

Upon seeing me, my mother sneered, 'Shame on you! Did you sleep next to your father last night?'

'Yes,' I replied simply.

She spat back, 'Shame on you! Did your father... do those things to you?'

'What things?' I asked, confused. But she repeated the

phrase 'Shame on you' several times with such a foul tone and suggestive gestures that her meaning finally hit me. In an instant, a grotesque and filthy image of her took shape in my mind.
Consorted by rage, I began shouting back at her before bolting out of the house. I was dazed, my mind spiraling. I even began to doubt myself, wondering: Could such a thing have happened while I was asleep without me knowing? Is it even possible? Why would my mother level such an accusation? Did she misinterpret the way I joked with my friends?
From that day on, even though I knew she was lying, her words stayed stuck in my nerves like a thorn. I became withdrawn. Whenever I walked outside, I instinctively kept my back toward the walls, terrified that something might happen.
A couple of days later, on my way to school, a friend of mine rode up behind me on his bicycle, kicked me in the backside, and tried to speed away. I completely lost control. I hurled my schoolbooks to the ground and sprinted after him, screaming curses. 'Stop if you dare!' I roared. Because we were in the neighborhood with people around, I managed to catch him. I shoved him until he wiped out with his bike, then I fell upon him, raining down slaps and kicks. Shocked by my ferocity, he kept crying out, 'I’m sorry! Forgive me!' I was so blinded by fury that had the neighbors not intervened, I don't know what I would have done to him.
From that day on, no one dared to mock me in that way again, yet the repulsive look in my mother’s eyes remained etched in my mind. She gradually became a stranger to me —someone whose only thoughts were centered on tormenting my father and me. My poor father was in a pitiable state, and his health worsened by the day. Despite this, my mother accused him of having an affair with his brother's widow. Amidst these slanders, I remember that after every prayer, my father would raise his hands to the heavens, asking God to make my mother
his **Houri** (celestial companion) in Paradise.
I recall a bitter, cold winter. My mother began an argument with my father. It was around four or five in the morning

when my father stepped out of the house barefoot. I had hidden my head under the quilt so they would think I was asleep. But my mother pulled the quilt off me and said, 'Your father is going to your aunt’s.' Then she told me, 'If you can secretly follow him and bring me news, I will give you five Rials.' I quickly got ready and followed him.

I trailed him at a distance of about ten meters until he reached a large square called **Gozar-e Farrokh**, near my eldest sister's house. My father reached the exact center of the square when I turned my head for just a second to see if anyone was watching me. It took no more than a few seconds. When I turned back, my father had vanished from that vast square. I rushed to the center and searched everywhere, but found no trace of him.

I returned home dejectedly, telling myself that not only would my mother give me no money, but I would surely receive a sound thrashing. I entered the house trembling with fear, only to find my father—to my utter amazement—sitting in his room. I glanced at him, hoping he wouldn't realize I had followed him, but he looked at me and gave a smile that seemed to hold a world of secrets. To me, he had literally vanished in that moment. Regardless, the matter passed, and I went to sleep.

The next day, I asked my mother for my money. She replied, 'You brought no news; he came back on his own.' Days passed, and my father grew weaker and more ill by the day, while my mother seemed to grow stronger. Sometimes, she would even hit him. My father would moan jokingly to make me believe she was only playing, but my mother was not playing. It was as if she were taking revenge for something I didn't understand. Not a day went by without her harassing him.

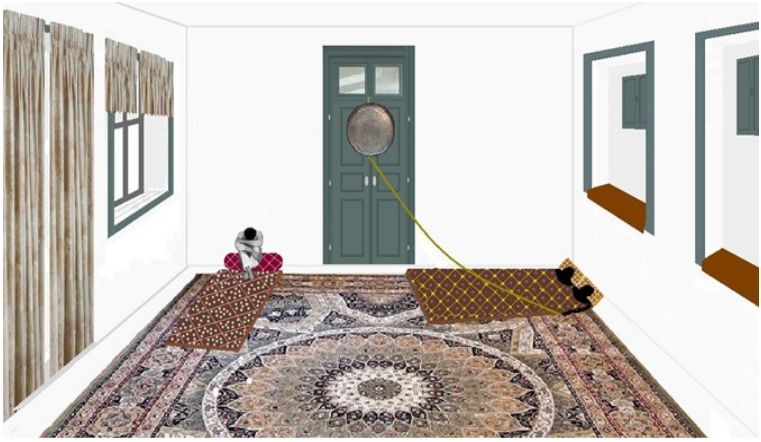
My father, in his stubbornness, stopped taking his medication. Whenever I protested, he would toss several pills into his mouth and say, 'Now you are relieved!' He had lost all hope and prayed for death every single day.

My Mother’s Torture of My Father

In the midst of all this, my father suffered a second stroke, leaving him barely able to move. One day, while I was helping him change his clothes, I noticed severe bruising and discolored blood on his upper arm. I asked him, 'Does it hurt?' He nodded weakly and whispered, 'Yes.' When I asked what had happened, he was too terrified to speak and simply gestured with his eyes toward my mother's room.
I asked my mother, 'What happened to Father's arm?' She replied dismissively, 'It looks like he fell down the stairs.' I informed my eldest sister. She and her husband arrived and saw that my father's arm had become deformed. Her husband brought a doctor, who confirmed that the arm had suffered a blunt force trauma and had fractured. Because it had been left untreated, the bone had fused back together crookedly. The doctor explained that since it hadn't fully healed, they would have to re-break the arm to realign it properly so it could set correctly.
Sometime later, I caught my mother threatening my father while holding an old sickle. It was then I realized she had struck his arm with the back of that very sickle, causing the fracture. I shuddered to think what she did to him when we weren't around, as he lived in constant terror of her.
My father's room faced the street. At that time, it was a trend for young men to shorten their motorcycle exhausts to create a deafening, soul-crushing noise. This sound was pure agony for my father, especially at night. If a motorcycle sped past his window and revved its engine, he would jump out of his sleep, crying, 'May God curse you for not letting me sleep!' But my mother would smile, finding joy in his suffering.
It was from this point that my mother decided to devise a tool specifically to torment him even further. Between our room and my father's, there was a double-leaf wooden door, and at the top of it, there was a chain...
A chain hung from the top of the double-leaf wooden door, which had glass panes on its upper half. A hook was also installed there; at night, when we wanted to close the door, we had to loop the chain over that hook to keep it shut.
One day, I noticed my mother making quite a racket in the courtyard. I went to her and saw her struggling with a large

stone—the kind used for grinding walnut kernels—and a big iron nail, which was typically used to darken the

through the corner of a large copper tray, but because the tray
was so thick, she wasn't succeeding. Not knowing why she



wanted a hole in it, I stepped in to help her.
First, I asked, 'Why do you want to punch a hole in this tray?' She snapped back, 'None of your business. If you can do it, come here; if not, get lost.' I took the stone and the nail from her and, with one powerful strike, pierced the corner of the tray. 'See? I did it with just one blow,' I said. I tried to hand the tools back, but she insisted, 'Make another hole at the bottom of the tray.' I punched the second hole, handed the tools to her, and went about my business.
That night, after I had laid out the bedding, my mother got up and closed the door between the two rooms. She brought the tray from the kitchen. Using a rope she had already threaded through the holes, she hung it from the hook
at the top of the door and stretched the other end of the rope to where she
and my sister slept.

I turned off the lamp and fell into a deep, comfortable sleep. Suddenly, a deafening, metallic roar jolted me awake. I heard my father’s voice crying out, 'May God curse you! Why are you doing this? Woman, what injustice have I ever done to you that you treat me this way?' My mother simply smiled upon hearing his cries. She rang that tray again and again that night. Every time it struck, it felt as if I were standing between mountains, the sound echoing endlessly in my ears.

Still dazed from sleep, I heard my sister pleading with my mother, 'Please, let me sleep! I have school tomorrow.' I buried my head under the quilt and tried to drift off, but I don't even know how I managed to fall back asleep. In the morning, I struggled to get up for school. All along the way, I was haunted by the thought of why I had helped her pierce that tray; the guilt weighed heavily on my conscience.

That day at school, the other kids kept picking on me, which led to a brutal fight. The proctor, as usual, ordered the **Bastinado**. It felt as if he hadn't slept well himself or had fought with his wife. When he saw the janitor wasn't striking my soles hard enough, he growled, 'Give it to me, I'll show you how it's done.' He lashed my feet with all his might to vent his own rage.

The man was so heartless that even the janitor took pity on me and protested, 'You're going to kill the boy!' He pulled me away from the proctor and took me to his room, asking his wife to put my feet in cold water to num the pain. I couldn't stand; my feet were so swollen I couldn't even fit them into my shoes.

After a while, the proctor came in and apologized, saying, 'I was just very angry.' I thought to myself, *You’re lucky I fought today, so you could unleash your fury on me; otherwise, you might have seriously hurt someone else.* He told me to skip class and just go home.

I limped back home in agony. When my mother opened the door and saw me carrying my shoes with my feet bandaged in slippers, she said with total indifference, 'Shame on you, fighting again!'

Because of the pain, I stayed in that day. When night fell, my mother repeated the torture with the copper tray. My

sister buried her head under the quilt, pressing her hands over her ears, trying to find sleep. She didn't dare protest; whenever she did, my mother would strike her and hurl vile insults and accusations at her. She was trapped in a miserable situation, and I couldn't defend her because my feet were so mangled I was bedridden. I knew if I confronted my mother, she would set upon me with a stick. I had no choice but to remain silent for a few days until I could walk again.

The Bathhouse Heist and Forming a Football Team

It was just a few days before the Persian New Year (**Nowruz**). I had gone to the **Amini Bathhouse** for my ritual wash. As I was undressing to put my clothes in the locker, I noticed a wealthy merchant (**Hajji Bazari**) standing right next to me, preparing to use the locker adjacent to mine.

As he took off his jacket, I spotted a thick wad of banknotes in his inner breast pocket. I tucked my clothes away, locked the door, and slipped the key—fastened to an elastic band—around my wrist. I entered the washing hall, where a small pool sat in the center. In one section, men sat on stone benches while the bath attendant (**Dallak**) lathered their heads with soap. In another corner, an attendant was massaging a client, while several showers lined the opposite wall.

Usually, everyone would rinse off first before sitting on the benches to be scrubbed. I stepped into one of the showers and peered through the gap in the door to see if the merchant had entered. I saw him come in, rinse himself, and take a seat on the bench. The attendant approached and began covering his entire face and head with thick soap suds.

While his eyes and face were buried under the foam, I slipped out of the shower and headed back to the dressing room. I opened my locker and, while pretending to dry

myself with my **Lung** (traditional bath wrap), I pulled out the small pocketknife I always carried. I managed to pop his locker open and snatched the wad of cash from his jacket. The bills were brand new—the crisp kind people specially order from bank clerks months in advance to give as New Year gifts (**Eidi**).

I hid the money in my socks, closed his locker, dressed quickly, paid the bath fee, and walked out calmly. Once outside, I bolted to my secret hideout behind the mosque. I pried the tomb tile open and stashed the money inside my hidden box. Every day after that, I went back to inspect it, making sure my treasure was still there.

A few days passed, and once the dust had settled, I began spending the money, one bill at a time. It was a significant sum. With it, I managed to form our neighborhood's first under-15 youth football team. I bought a football, a referee's whistle, and complete kits—jerseys, shorts, and socks—for every boy on the team. For myself, as the goalkeeper, I bought proper goalie gear and boots. I was a talented keeper; I'd even dive for the ball on the hard asphalt. Naturally, I was the coach and the captain as well. Gradually, we began competing in local matches, even winning a championship trophy once. Whenever we played against other neighborhoods, many people would place bets on our victory. There was a sports photographer living in our area who was Armenian, though for some reason everyone called him '**Ali Akkas**' (Ali the Photographer). He was a kind soul who attended every match, sending his photos to sports magazines and giving prints to the players. Every time Ali Akkas saw us playing, he'd instinctively snap a few shots. He took several group photos of our team. Once, he even captured a photo of me performing acrobatics on the bicycle I had bought with the stolen bathhouse money—and he never charged me a cent for it.

It was a source of great pride that I had formed the first under-15 youth football team in our neighborhood. However, the boys gradually grew spoiled and even began demanding pocket money from me. There was another notable Armenian figure in Rasht named **Monsieur Arsen**, who ran a 24-hour pharmacy called **Karun Pharmacy**. During the bitter winter nights, Monsieur Arsen would drive through the streets, rescuing the homeless and destitute from the freezing cold. When the weather warmed, he would release them back. May his soul rest in peace.
During this time, my father’s health was deteriorating day by day. He could no longer walk or speak, communicating with us only through gestures. My eldest brother, who lived in **Qazvin** and would only return to Rasht during holidays to take money from my father’s pockets, brought a doctor. After the examination, the doctor bluntly told us that my father’s time was up and he wouldn't last more than a few weeks. We were devastated that he said this right in front of him. When we protested, the doctor dismissed it, saying, 'Don’t worry, he doesn't understand a word we're saying.'

But I was certain my father had heard every word; I saw his eyes widen in shock.
That day was incredibly difficult. The doctor left, my siblings departed, and only I, my sister, and my mother remained with a father who was completely bedridden. He had lost all bodily control, and caring for him was an immense task. My two elder sisters divided the labor, coming every other day to help us sit him up and change him. Because I couldn't manage his hygiene alone, we eventually had to cut a hole in his bed, placing a basin underneath and lining it with plastic, so we wouldn't have to change his clothes several times a day.
He lay on his back, and gradually, dark pressure sores and bedsores began to appear on his skin. His body needed air, but I couldn't lift him off the bed alone. My mother wouldn't lift a finger to help; instead, she continued her harassment, perhaps hoping he would pass away sooner.
In my father’s room, there was a small cabinet containing a wooden chest where he kept his deeds, documents, and his will. He would occasionally revise his will. My mother had taken the key to the cabinet, and gradually, many items inside—including the will—began to vanish.
Months passed this way. My father grew thinner by the day, and I tried not to wander far from home, staying close in case something happened. It was during this time that **Cassius Clay** converted to Islam and changed his name to **Muhammad Ali**. His fame was legendary; Muslims everywhere prayed for his victory, and people would wait for hours to watch his boxing matches. Inspired, I signed up at the **Chaharom-e Aban** club in Rasht. In my very first session, the coach put me in the ring with an experienced boxer to test my mettle. Having mimicked Ali’s 'footwork,' I won in two rounds. The coach encouraged me, saying I had a bright future if I continued.

The Day My Father Left Me Alone

One day, as I sat in front of the house joking and chatting with two neighborhood friends, my sister flung the door open, sobbing. 'Father is struggling to breathe!' she cried. I rushed to his side instantly. He was taking his final, labored breaths. I looked into his eyes and saw him turn his gaze toward me.

At that moment, my mother entered the room and said with chilling composure, 'Take the quilt off him; it’s too heavy for him now.' I looked back into my father’s eyes; a flicker of joy seemed to swell within them, as if he were saying: 'Do not be upset by your mother's words; I am going to a better place. Soon, everyone will be relieved of me.' His breathing grew slower and slower, then he took one deep, final breath, and an absolute silence took hold. The eyes that had been fixed on me became motionless.

I heard my mother’s voice asking, 'Is it over?' I replied, 'Yes, you’re finally free!' My sister broke into wails and laments, but I was in shock, unable to believe I had truly lost my father. My mind could only race with one thought: *What destiny awaits me now?*

When I pressed my ear to his chest, I realized his heart had stopped. I was alone in the room with my father’s body, not knowing what to do. In the other room, my sister paced back and forth, weeping, while my mother sat calmly in a chair as if nothing had happened. She refused to even enter the room to say her final goodbye. She was in a strange state; perhaps because my father had finally fallen into eternal silence, she had become indifferent. I couldn't tell if she was relieved or saddened by his passing.

She told me, 'Go find Agha Reza, the janitor at Shahriar School, and tell him your father is dead.' I hopped on my bicycle and went looking for him. He wasn't home, and his wife panicked when she saw me. 'What happened?' she asked. I just kept asking for Agha Reza. 'He’s just nearby doing some shopping; he'll be back soon,' she said. 'Now tell me, why are you so distressed?' I answered, 'My father is dead.' She was heartbroken and said, 'Go home; I’ll find Agha Reza and tell him to come to your house immediately.' I thanked her and rode my bicycle back home. I left the bike I loved so much right there in the alley and rushed to my father’s side. I saw that my mother had removed the quilt

and draped a simple white sheet over him. My sister Nasrin was nowhere to be found. When I asked where she was, my mother replied with total indifference, 'I think she went to get your sister, Simin.'

I went back into my father's room and stood by the bed, trying to etch his image into my memory. For some reason, I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that he was gone. He was so still, so peaceful. I felt a flicker of relief that he was finally free from pain, yet a heavy sorrow took hold of me as the ache of being fatherless was added to my burdens.

A few minutes later, Agha Reza entered the courtyard with a solemn '**Ya Allah**.' When he saw me, he came over, pulled me into an embrace, and said, 'Don't be sad; you are a man now.' We entered my father's room together. After looking at the body, he asked me to bring a small mirror.

He held the mirror to my father's mouth, and after a few seconds of silence, he whispered, 'May God rest his soul.' He asked me to help him turn the bed toward the **Qibla**. Then he told me to ask my mother to come and close his eyes, as was her place as his wife. I relayed the message, but she refused. Upon hearing her rejection, Agha Reza turned to me and said, 'Then you must do it.' With trembling hands, I gently closed my father's eyes.

Together, we changed him out of his old, worn clothes, sealing them in a plastic bag. Meanwhile, my eldest sister arrived with her husband, followed gradually by others. The weeping began, soon escalating into loud wails and lamentations. My mother remarked mockingly, 'Now they try to show how much they loved him with their shrieking.' Then, in a final act of protest, she walked out of the house. I believe she went to her sister's home; she was the only person my mother sought out during hard times. That aunt had mental health struggles of her own, though she was never harmful to anyone. Despite having several other sisters, my mother only shared a deep bond with this one. Whenever she fought with my father, she would flee to her house to vent.

Imagine that: someone in a marital crisis, in need of wise counsel, goes to someone who is mentally unstable themselves. Instead of guiding my mother, her sister would

simply validate her rage, spinning imaginary tales about her own husband to fuel the fire. Rather than dousing my mother’s anger, she only made it burn brighter.
For instance, my mother would tell her, 'I fought with my husband because I suspect he’s involved with another woman.' Her sister would reply, 'Sister, you are right to be vigilant.' She would then claim she faced the same issue, asserting she had 'caught' her own husband in an affair with the **Queen of England**. She recounted how she once came home unexpectedly, and her husband, startled, asked why she was back so early. She snapped, 'Why are you so nervous? Is that woman here again? Tell me where she's hiding!' She searched every room but found no one. She then told my mother, 'Well, she is the Queen, after all; the British paratroopers must have swooped down from the sky to rescue her. If she had tried to flee by land, I would have caught her.' She added that it was a disgrace to the British that the Queen wasn't even loved by her husband, before advising my mother: 'You must watch your husband closely so they don't take him away.'
After my mother left the house in protest, my eldest sister's husband—the principal—arrived with our family doctor. After examining my father’s body, the doctor issued the death certificate. We waited for my elder brothers to arrive from **Qazvin** and **Tehran** to decide on the next steps.
At dusk, we moved my father’s body to the mosque across from his shop to remain there overnight. The plan was to wait for the rest of the relatives to arrive in the morning before moving him to **Taze-Abad** for the ritual washing and burial. It was arranged for the same Quran reciter I knew to stay with the body until dawn. We placed the body in a room, and I stayed there beside my father throughout the night.
I was remarkably fearless. In the past, to conquer my fears, I had often entered the Taze-Abad cemetery alone at midnight, constantly whispering '**Bismillah**' (In the name of God) because I had heard it makes the Jinn flee. I had even made bets with my friends that I could sleep alone on a grave for an entire hour after dark.
And so, I spent the night by my father's side along with the reciter. I drifted off a few times, only to be jolted awake by

him. Gradually, relatives and acquaintances who had heard the news gathered at the mosque. They lifted my father's casket onto their shoulders, and we began the procession toward the Taze-Abad cemetery. Upon arrival, they took him into the washing room (**Ghosl-khaneh**) and asked everyone to leave. But I stayed; I refused to walk out.
As they began the ritual washing of the body (**Ghusl**), I noticed my father's back and shoulders were covered in bruises and dark hematomas. I watched with a strange, detached calm; for some reason, I couldn't bring myself to weep like the others. After the washing, they shrouded him in the white **Kafan** and prepared him for burial. However, we had to wait for my eldest and middle brothers, who had not yet arrived from out of town.
I was exhausted beyond words, moving like a ghost. I wandered out of the cemetery aimlessly until I found myself near a cinema. Without even checking what movie was playing, I bought a ticket and sat in the dark hall. It wasn't crowded; most people there were just napping—mostly street vendors who had finished their lunch and had nowhere else to rest for an hour or two. I couldn't even focus on the screen. To this day, I don't know why I chose the cinema at that moment.
After about thirty minutes, I headed back to the **Taze-Abad** cemetery. My brother Torab had traveled from Tehran to Qazvin to meet our eldest brother, Ramin, and they had arrived together. Amidst the condolences, one of my female cousins reminded my eldest brother that our uncle and father—the two inseparable brothers—had purchased a two-tier grave in the city of **Qom**. My beloved uncle occupied the lower tier, and the upper one was reserved for my father. The deed to the plot was with my eldest cousin in Tehran.
Transporting a body from Rasht to Tehran or Qom in a regular vehicle was forbidden; it required a specialized refrigerated hearse and official permits. After consulting with friends, my eldest brother decided to rent a minibus. They placed the casket at the very back and piled layers of fresh herbs and greens over it. The idea was to deceive the **Gendarmerie** (highway police) into thinking we were

transporting produce rather than a corpse. A few close relatives and friends boarded, and we set off for Tehran. On the road, the Gendarmerie stopped us for a routine check. They took a cursory look, noticed the greens, and waved us through without issue. By nightfall, we reached Tehran. We drove the minibus straight to my cousin's house. He came to the door with the deed to the grave, promising to meet us in Qom later.

We set off from Tehran toward **Qom**. As the day grew warmer, the scent of the herbs faded, replaced by the heavy smell of the shroud. Upon arriving in Qom, they verified the deed to the plot. My cousin also brought the sacred shroud (**Kafan**) that my father had purchased in **Karbala** and entrusted to him years ago; they used it for his burial.

They placed my father beside the grave of his beloved elder brother. The earth had been opened, ready to take him into its embrace. As we stood around the open grave, before they lowered him in, I stepped down into the pit and lay there for a moment. I wanted to ensure he wouldn't be alone on his first night in the grave, just as he had told me... He had once shared that when he buried his own brother, he too had lain in the grave for a few moments so his brother wouldn't feel solitary. I had learned this final act of devotion from him. Together, we lowered his body into the earth. My brother, Torab, nearly fell into the grave in his grief, but they caught him just in time. The only person absent from the ceremony was my mother; she had always been terrified of cemeteries.

Once the burial concluded, we returned to Rasht for the third-day memorial service (**Sevvom**), held at the mosque across from my father's shop. Afterward, relatives and close friends gathered at our home to offer their condolences. One of them whispered to my sister, 'Watch over your little brother; he still hasn't cried. He is in deep shock and denial.' My sister agreed, 'It's true, Mansour hasn't shed a single tear since Father passed, and it could be dangerous for him.' They urged me several times, 'Try to cry, let it out.' I tried, but it was no use; the tears wouldn't come.

Gradually, the crowds dispersed, and everyone returned to their own lives. My mother finally reappeared. During all the time she spent with her sister, no one stopped to ask

why she always sought refuge with someone who was mentally unstable. No one considered that my mother herself might have developed a psychological illness and needed medical help. Our lives were in such disarray that everyone was simply consumed by their own survival.

I was left with my sister, my mother, and her endless torments. My father was gone. That night, my sister was so exhausted that she fell asleep beside my mother. I was just drifting off when she woke up sobbing; she had seen Father in her dreams. Instead of comforting her, my mother snapped, 'Shut up and go back to sleep.' My sister obeyed, but sleep had vanished from my eyes.

From that night on, the void left by my father began to ache. I was glad he had passed, for life had become unbearable for him. In our absence, my mother harassed him so relentlessly that he longed for death every day. He had been so helpless; I remember the shame in his eyes whenever we had to change his clothes, as if he felt he was a burden to us.

He was finally at peace, but with his departure, the landscape of my life shifted. I lost all passion for boxing. My mother started telling me, 'You are a man now; you are the head of the household. You must watch over your sister and see who she associates with.' With these words, she sought to burden me with the weight of responsibility in my father's absence. My sister finished tenth grade and I finished eighth, but I no longer had the heart for school.

After the funeral, everyone's mourning ended, and they returned to their lives. My sister began spending most of her time—and many nights—at our eldest sister Simin’s house. My eldest brother would only visit Rasht on Fridays, and every time he arrived, fueled by my mother’s complaints, he would subject me to a brutal beating.

He seemed to find a twisted sense of calm in hitting me. He never exerted much energy or chased me around, fearing he might sweat and ruin the scent of his clothes. He would approach slowly, then suddenly deliver a kick to the sensitive areas of my lower back that would leave me paralyzed on the floor.

While my body was numb and I couldn't move, he would strike my head with his knuckles so hard that a lump would

form instantly. As I screamed in agony, clutching my head, he would look at me with a chillingly composed smile and say, 'Did you like that? This is called a **Torshak** (sour pinch), and I have plenty more for you.'
Then, he would bid my mother goodbye, assuring her that I would be obedient from then on, and leave. He would return the following week to truly make me understand the meaning of being an orphan.
As the days passed, the memory of my father's death began to fade for others, but for me, his absence grew heavier every day. Eventually, he began to appear in my dreams. One night, I dreamed of a moaning sound coming from the hallway of our house. I crept toward the noise. The closer I got, the louder it became, yet it was muffled, and I couldn’t tell whose voice it was. When I reached the middle of the hallway, I realized the sound was coming from beneath my feet. I knelt and pressed my ear to the floor. It was my father. Panicked, I cried out, 'Father, don't worry, I’m coming to help you!'
I began digging into the hallway floor with my bare hands. Slowly, his hand appeared. Even as blood began to drip from my fingertips, I kept digging. I cleared away the earth, grabbed his hand, and pulled him out. I cradled him in my arms like a child, carried him into the room, and told my mother, 'Look, Father is alive!'
I told him, 'I’ll bring you some clothes,' but he whispered, 'I’m so hungry.' I brought him every bit of food we had in the house. He began to eat with a desperate intensity, as if he hadn’t eaten in months. He devoured everything I brought.
Then, he began to crawl across the floor to get from our room back to his own; he was unable to stand or walk. Seeing this, I cursed those who had buried him alive and caused his paralysis.
I was weeping in my sleep when my sister woke me up. My face was drenched in sweat. 'Where is Father?' I asked her. 'Did you dream of him?' she replied. Still unable to believe it was just a dream, I rushed to the hallway. There was no sign of the earth being torn up, yet the tips of my fingers throbbed with pain from the digging, even though there was no blood.

I returned to my bed. I had never been able to sleep with my head under the quilt, but that night, I pulled it over me and wept for my own loneliness until I finally drifted back to sleep.
Interestingly, I dreamed of my father again. When I woke up, I had no strength to leave my bed. I just sat there, hugging my knees, lost in thought. My sister asked, 'What did you dream about last night?'
'About Father,' I replied.
'Won't you tell me?' she asked. I described it to her, weeping as I held my knees—for I had no one else's arms to cry in. My sister was all I had left. Her only focus was finishing her diploma so she could study nursing at university and move into the dorms.
My sister's path was clear; she was merely enduring her short time left with us. She spent most of her nights at our eldest sister's house anyway. After I shared my dream, she too dreamed of our father the following night. She cried in her sleep and jolted awake at the sound of her own sobbing. She wanted to keep crying, but as usual, my mother barked, 'Shut up!' I protested, 'She had a nightmare; she can't help it.' Seeing me defend her, my mother shot back, 'If you had any honor (**Gheirat**), you wouldn't let your sister associate with those bad friends of hers.' Her words played on my mind, pushing me to start monitoring my sister more closely.
Sometimes, to verify my mother's claims, I would follow my sister to see who her friends were. One evening, running late and trying to get home quickly, I took a shortcut through the back alleys. I reached a dark lane where a streetlamp had burnt out. From a distance, I saw a burly man pinning a young woman against the wall, seemingly assaulting her. At first, I was terrified to intervene, but my sense of 'honor' was provoked. I thought, *What if this were your own sister?*
I gathered a few stones from the ground. Trembling, I yelled at the man, whose face was hidden in the shadows: 'You dishonorable wretch, what do you think you're doing?' I hurled the stones at him. The man was forced to let the girl go and turned toward me. As I backed away, I screamed at the girl, 'Run!' But to my utter amazement, she stood her

ground, motionless. She seemed to be waiting for the man to return to her. I couldn't tell if she was paralyzed by fear or if there was no assault taking place at all. Realizing my efforts were futile, I turned and took another route home. What I had witnessed in that alley left a dark mark on me. From that day on, I became even more controlling toward my sister and her friends. Those were the days when miniskirts had just become fashionable. One day, two of my sister's friends came by to pick her up for a birthday party. When the doorbell rang, I moved to answer it, but my sister said, 'They're my friends, don't open it, I'll do it.' I ignored her and opened the door anyway. Seeing her friends in short dresses, I barked at one of them, 'Why is your dress so short?' She was quick-witted and shot back, 'Are you my father to be questioning me?'

As my sister prepared to leave with them, I didn't want to back down or lose face. 'Where are you going with these girls?' I demanded. My eyes caught a red flower pinned to her dress. 'Oh, I see you've pinned a red flower on too!' I sneered. Her friend muttered, 'Ignore him, he’s just a kid.' Hearing that, I turned to my sister: 'Until you take that red flower off your dress, I won't let you go to that party. A red flower means you’re in love with someone.' I humiliated her in front of her friends. My sister began to cry. One of her friends said, 'Aren’t you ashamed of making your sister cry? You’re the one with the dirty mind for thinking such things about her.' But I was adamant. 'If I have a dirty mind, then tell her to take off the flower so she can go with you.' Her friend eventually told my sister, 'Fine, your brother is right, just take it off.' They helped her unpin it and tucked it into her purse. As soon as they were out of my sight, she pinned it right back on.

This is the only memory my sister still talks about, even forty years later. But she didn't realize the fault wasn't mine. It was the expectation my mother placed on me in that patriarchal society. At that time, if a man chased girls, it was seen as harmless, but a girl wasn't even allowed to think about such things. When she eventually went to her husband's house, she was expected to be completely naive. If she showed any affection or knowledge of intimacy, the

only thing that would cross her husband's mind was that she must have been with someone else before him.
Yes, that was the expectation society had of a man. A girl's reputation was equivalent to the reputation of the entire family. Especially in a household where the 'patriarch' was a fifteen-year-old boy, fueled by a mother who insisted, 'In your father's absence, you are the man of the house'—a man of the house who, to be 'toughened up,' had to endure a weekly beating from his eldest brother based on his mother's complaints.
My body had grown so accustomed to his beatings that I would mentally prepare myself even before he arrived for the holidays. Yet, no matter how much I braced for it, when he struck my vertebrae with the tip of his shoe, my entire body would go numb. To survive, I began avoiding the house whenever he was expected, often seeking refuge at my sister’s home.
Slowly, I began to earn my own way. I would buy broken electrical appliances at low prices from the second-hand dealers near the **Khaahar-Emam Mosque**, repair them, and sell them for a profit. I was finally entering the workforce and building an income. I started taking contract work from a local electrical shop; the owner would keep fifty percent of the customer's payment and give me the other half. He valued me because he knew my work was meticulous and precise.
This, however, fueled the jealousy of his younger brother, who lacked any technical skills. In the owner’s absence, he would try to boss me around, barking orders at me. I stood my ground, repeatedly telling him, 'I am not your servant. I take this work as a contractor from your brother, and it’s none of your business how I do it.' Every time I delivered a finished job, I collected my pay and went on my way.

My Mother’s Stones and the Neighbor’s House

Our house was nestled between an alleyway and a side street that led to the main boulevard. The living room faced the side street, boasting four windows, each with a wide ledge—deep enough to sit on and watch the world go by. Two of these windows, one framed in wood and the other in glass, looked out onto the alley. Because the house opposite ours was set back a few meters, that glass window offered a panoramic view of the entire neighborhood, stretching all the way to the main road.

As long as my father was alive, a beggar woman used to sit beneath that window. But after his passing, when the living room became my mother’s domain, that window became her private gallery. She spent her lonely days perched behind it. To rid herself of the beggar's noise, she once resorted to pouring water on her, forcing the poor woman to flee. My mother had claimed the window; from behind its veil, the street was her cinema, while she remained invisible to the world. Only at dusk, when the room lights flickered on, could passersby discern a silhouette, though they could never tell who it was.

Once the beggar left, the spot became the neighborhood’s unofficial meeting point. Neighbors would gather there to wait for friends, exchanging gossip and news. Local youths congregated too—some to flirt, others to coordinate their plans: "Let’s meet under the window tomorrow at eight." Amidst the greetings and news, there was no shortage of bravado. One would brag, "I was out with two girls last night," while another claimed, "I’ve started seeing so-and-so." Without even trying, my mother became the living archive of the neighborhood's secrets—a vault of truths and lies that grew larger by the day.

This continued until the day she overheard the neighbor’s son talking about my sister to a friend. That night, around two or three in the morning, she jolted me awake. "Get up, you coward!" she hissed. "People are throwing stones at our house while you’re fast asleep." Groggy and confused, my anger flared. She did everything she could to goad me into a confrontation.

Clutching a wooden club and still in my slippers, I stormed out toward the house she pointed to. I pounded on their door, shouting obscenities: "If you have the guts, open this

door and I’ll show you what’s what!" But they didn't dare face me.
Eventually, a neighbor intervened. "Shouting at this hour is wrong; you're only shaming your own family," he said, trying to calm me down. He promised to speak to them the next day, assuring me they weren't bad people. I relented and went back inside.
My mother asked, "Well, what happened? Did you hit them?"
"No," I replied.
"Why, you spineless boy?"
"They didn't dare open the door," I said. "They knew if they did, something terrible would happen."
The night passed, and the next day I went to the neighbor who had promised to mediate. "So, did you talk to them?" I asked.
"Yes," he replied. "They said that stones are being thrown from your house toward theirs at night, and they are simply throwing the same stones back at you."
"They’re lying," I countered. "I saw with my own eyes that stones were coming from their house. Maybe someone else is trying to start a feud between us."
I said nothing to my mother; I knew it would be futile. But I kept asking myself: What is really going on with these stones?
That night, I told my mother I was exhausted from the lack of sleep. I laid out my bedding and pretended to drift off, even faking a few snores to make sure she was convinced. I wanted to catch the culprit red-handed.
I was just beginning to nod off for real when I saw my mother rise from her bed and head into the courtyard. She picked up the copper ewer, filled it with water, and started toward the outhouse. Halfway there, she leaned down, set the ewer on the ground, picked something up, and hurled it toward the neighbor's house. Then she grabbed the ewer and continued toward the outhouse. She waited for a moment to see if the neighbor would retaliate, and when there was no response, she turned back, readying herself for another throw.
I lunged out of the room. "So, it was you! You were the one throwing stones at people's houses?"

Caught off guard, she stammered, "You're a coward who couldn't stand up to them, so I decided to do it myself!"
"Why are you lying?" I demanded. I walked over to the spot where she had leaned down and saw several clean, washed stones she had set aside beforehand.
"How could you be so heartless?" I said. "Didn't you think about what could have happened last night? You fueled my rage and sent me after them with a club—thank God they didn't open that door! If they had, and I had cracked someone's skull, I'd be rotting in a prison cell right now. What kind of mother wants to see her own son behind bars?
When she realized she had been caught red-handed, she became as agitated as a killer discovered at a crime scene and backed away from me. Out of fear that I might retaliate, she grabbed a large kitchen knife, tucked it under her pillow, and went to bed.
Terrified that she might come at me with that knife once I fell asleep, I stayed awake until dawn. For a long time after that incident, I would lie in bed every night, feigning sleep, waiting for her to get up to use the bathroom. Only then could I snatch the knife from under her pillow and finally sleep in peace for the rest of the night.
During those days of conflict with my mother, my eldest brother would visit us in Rasht once a week. My mother constantly complained to him about me. Since he was already accustomed to beating me, he would sometimes set upon me even without her complaints.
I remember one day, while I was fleeing from my eldest brother into the courtyard, my middle brother, Torab, grabbed me from behind to curry favor with the eldest. I managed to break free with a sudden move, which infuriated him so much that he slapped me hard across the face. I just looked at him, offering no reaction.
My silence only enraged him further. "What's the matter?" he barked. "Think you can take me? Go ahead, hit me!"
"You know well enough," I replied, "that if you weren't my brother, I would have broken your arm." He attacked again, striking me several times on the head and face. "Hit me if you have the guts! Why don't you?"
I told him, "You can hit me as much as you like, but because you are my brother, I won't lay a hand on you."

He knew perfectly well that without our eldest brother's presence, he wouldn't have dared raise a finger against me. He was a weak, cowardly man who only found his courage in the shadow of my eldest brother, knowing that if I reacted, the eldest would rush to his aid.

It was a grueling time. One day, a neighbor came to me; his son was getting married, and he wanted me to decorate his house with lights and colored streamers. "My fuse box is too weak for so many lights," he worried. "I'm afraid they'll blow in the middle of the party."

I told him, "I won't even touch your fuse box. You just need to pay the policeman at the door a small fee so the electric company officer doesn't bother us. I'll secretly tap into the city's main power line." He agreed to my fee.

The day my friend and I were decorating, the owner and a few others drained the courtyard pool completely, then refilled it with ice and all sorts of alcoholic drinks. Unbeknownst to me, my friend snatched a bottle and hid it to drink later. We hung the colored bulbs, the streamers, and a few paper lanterns I had made, and began setting up the loudspeakers. Guests were trickling in, the band had arrived, and the music and dancing were just beginning to start

Bottle after bottle was uncorked, and many guests left their glasses half-full on the tables. When they returned for their drinks, the glasses were empty—my friend had been surreptitiously finishing them off. I had never touched alcohol before and had no idea of my limits. When dinner was served, the host came over and told us not to be shy, to treat the place as our own and enjoy ourselves. He insisted we go and help ourselves to the food. We thanked him, filled our plates, and found a quiet corner to eat. My friend pulled out the bottle he had stolen, opened it, poured two glasses, and handed one to me. "Cheers," he said. "To your health." Not knowing how much was too much, I began to drink along with him. It smelled foul, but I said nothing, not wanting him to think I was just a kid. When the first bottle was gone, he went to the pool, snatched another from the ice, and we finished that too. By midnight or one in the morning, I told the host, "I don't feel well; I need to head home." My friend stayed behind, as it was his job to

disconnect the lights from the city’s power line after the ceremony.

I stumbled out of the house, barely able to control my movements. As I approached the neighborhood where my father used to have his shop—where everyone knew us—I tried to hug the walls for support, but I kept failing. I could hardly walk. Every time I tried to steer myself to the right, I veered to the left. With immense effort, I finally reached our house. I thrust the key into the lock, but it wouldn't turn; because it was so late, my mother had barred the door from the inside.

Hearing my struggle with the door, she came over groggily, unbolted it, and went back to bed, grumbling the whole way. I went to find my bedding, but it was nowhere to be seen. "Where are my quilt and mattress?" I asked. From under her covers, she muttered, "Maybe they’re on the *dastaksara* (the porch railing)." In my drunken state, I staggered to the porch, grabbed the quilt from the railing, and dragged it into the room. I went back for the mattress, but I couldn't find it.

I felt wretched and could no longer stand. *I'll just sleep right here,* I told myself. I crawled under the quilt, and suddenly, my stomach turned. I tried to stand but failed. I managed to crawl on all fours to the porch and vomited over the railing into the courtyard. When I returned to the room, it felt as if my insides were being torn out. My mother began her usual scolding: "Shame on you... and you’re supposed to be the man of the house!" My sister, lying beside her, had pulled the covers over her head and was weeping silently. I have no memory of how I eventually fell asleep; I only know that when I woke up, the mattress was on top of me and the quilt was underneath. The next day, I went to comfort my sister.

The Theft and the Great Escape

Gradually, my relationship with my sister improved, and I stopped bothering her. This change, however, did not seem to bring my mother any joy. One day, I came home for lunch to find them both at the table. I sat down and began eating in a rush; I had no desire to linger in that house and wanted to be out as quickly as possible. I was bolting down my food, swallowing large mouthfuls without even chewing.

My mother had served my plate, and as I was eating, something suddenly got stuck in my teeth. It had happened before—usually a stray bit of barley stalk—so I assumed it was the same. I reached in, plucked it out, and tossed it toward the tray. But instead of a soft thud, I heard a sharp *clink*-clink against the aluminum lid of the rice pot sitting on the spread. A barley stalk doesn't make a sound like that, I thought. I searched for it and, to my horror, discovered it wasn't a stalk at all, but a sharp, purple-tinted tack—the kind cobblers use.

I couldn't believe my eyes. Using my spoon, I began to break apart the clumps of rice on my plate, and I found exactly what I feared: seven or eight small tacks hidden inside the mashed rice balls. As I unearthed them one by one, I showed them to my mother. "What are these nails doing in my food?" I demanded.

She replied with chilling nonchalance, "Ask your sister."

Upon hearing this, my sister burst into tears and turned to her. "Why are you lying? Am I insane? Why would I do such a thing?"

I looked directly at my mother. "You were trying to kill me. You knew I don't chew my food, so you pre-rolled the rice into balls and hid a couple of nails in each one."

My mother remained perfectly calm. "If I wanted to kill you," she said, "I wouldn't need nails. I would have used a cat’s brain instead. You would have swallowed it without knowing, gone mad, and died. No one would have ever known why you passed away."

"You didn't want to kill me outright," I countered. "You wanted to torture me with these nails."

From that day on, I refused to touch her cooking. I began spending more time at my eldest sister’s house. Whenever they asked if I had eaten, my answer was always the same: No.

Speaking of my sister’s house, I recall a day I was there for lunch; two of my other sisters were visiting as well. After the meal, they started playing *Haft-Sang* (Seven Stones)—a game where you toss seven small pebbles into the air and try to catch as many as possible on the back of your hand. Since they wouldn't let me join, I kept snatching their stones mid-air to disrupt the game. Eventually, they decided to give me a proper lesson.

They warned me several times that if I didn't stop, they would beat me. But I persisted: "Either let me play, or I won't let you play at all." They went on the defensive, and the moment I tried to grab their stones again, they all pounced on me, giving me a thorough thrashing.

I managed to break free and bolted down the stairs from the second floor toward the courtyard. Seeing them hot on my heels in a rage, I ducked into the outdoor latrine and bolted the door from the inside. No matter how hard they kicked and pushed, they couldn't get in. They demanded I come out, but I didn't dare. Finally, they grew tired and went back to their game.

Unsure if they were still lurking outside, I stayed put for a while. I noticed a small square ventilation hole at the top of the wall where a single lightbulb hung. In the evenings, that bulb served as a signal; if it was lit, anyone heading to the latrine would know it was occupied without having to walk all the way across the yard.

Trapped inside, I stepped onto the water tap, hauled myself up, and peered through that hole to survey the courtyard. The coast was clear. I carefully unscrewed the bulb, tucked it into my mouth for safekeeping, and with great effort, squeezed through the hole. Using the plum tree growing right next to the wall as a ladder, I climbed down—or rather, up into its branches. I hid there and reached back to reinstall the bulb in its socket.

I sat there quietly, munching on green plums, when I overheard one of my sisters say, "I'm going to check if Mansour is still in the latrine or if he’s come out." She came down the stairs and approached the door.

From my perch in the tree, I watched her, waiting to see if she’d realize I was gone. She knocked and called out, "Open the door; we promise we won't hurt you." Watching the

scene unfold from above, I saw her grow genuinely worried as she pounded on the door, pleading for me to open up. When she realized there was no sign of me, she began to wail: "Everyone, come quickly! Let's break the door down; maybe he’s collapsed or something terrible has happened!" Hearing her cries, the others rushed to help. They pounded on the latrine door, pleading with me to open it, but only silence followed. Finally, they threw their weight against the door and forced it open—only to find the small room empty.

"Maybe he fell through the hole into the cesspit!" someone cried out. Hearing this, I couldn't contain myself any longer and burst out laughing. When they stepped out and spotted me perched high in the tree, their worry instantly curdled into a double dose of fury. If they could have laid hands on me then, I wouldn't have had a single piece of me left whole.

No matter how much they insisted, I refused to come down. "You'll just beat me if I do," I shouted. "Go back inside the house, and only then will I climb down." They retreated indoors, and I scrambled down and headed for the main gate. Just as I was about to open it, my brother-in-law arrived and started to enter. Unaware of the chaos, he kept calling after me, "Where are you going? Come back, it’s late!"

But I didn't listen. I headed straight to our house, but as usual, my mother wouldn't open the door. I climbed the utility pole adjacent to our wall and slipped inside. My mother gave me a severe lashing with her words, and I couldn't find any peace to sleep that night. I realized things couldn't go on like this; I had to find a way out. I decided to flee Rasht and go to Isfahan to join my brother, Torab. I had heard he was working for a construction company near the Isfahan Steel Mill and was happy with his job. I told myself I would go and work alongside him.

My mother had a trunk where she kept her valuables. I had searched through it once before, looking for my father’s missing will—which I never found. However, I had discovered a stash of cash and some very old jewelry hidden in a small pouch, tucked away among some old fabrics she had received as gifts. I made up my mind to take those

items and leave for Isfahan. And that is exactly what I did. I took her purse and went to a travel agency to buy a bus ticket. But no matter how hard I tried, they refused to sell me one. They said they didn't issue tickets to minors under eighteen; children weren't allowed to travel long distances without a parent's permission.

With no other choice, I went to the station where the Mercedes-Benz taxis gathered. They were more expensive than the bus, but I had no alternative; I had to get to Isfahan by any means necessary. The drivers kept refusing to take me until I spotted a dispatcher—a man organizing passengers and shouting, "Qazvin! Tehran!" I approached him and said, "I need to get to Tehran."

He looked at me skeptically. "Beat it, kid. Are you running away?"

"No, I swear!" I replied. "I came to Rasht with my father and got separated from him. Now I need to get back to my family in Tehran."

"How much money do you have?" he asked.

When I asked about the fare, the price he quoted was significantly higher than the standard rate—clearly, he wanted a cut for himself. I had no choice but to agree.

He took my hand, led me to a driver, and lied: "This kid is my relative." He asked the driver to drop me off at Shahyad Square in Tehran, claiming someone would be there to pick me up. The driver, a decent man, agreed. "Sit in the front," he told me. "If the road police ask, just say you're my family."

When we reached the Abyek rest stop for lunch, he pulled over. There was a special room for drivers where the food was better and cheaper than the general dining area. "Do you have any money?" he asked. Not wanting to reveal my stash, I said, "No."

"Are you hungry?"

"No," I lied again, "I just ate."

"The food here is different," he insisted. "Eat; it’s on me." I stayed quiet, but when the meal arrived with all the side dishes, I polished off every last bit. The driver laughed and said, "Lucky for me you weren't hungry! If you were, I’d be broke by now."

We continued toward Tehran and arrived around two in the afternoon. He dropped me at Shahyad Square and drove off. I breathed a sigh of relief; I had successfully cleared the first stage of my escape. I took a taxi to my aunt's house on Jamadi-al-Haq Street. She had two sons, and I knew I could spend the night there. When I knocked, my uncle opened the door. He recognized me from my father’s funeral. "What are you doing here? Come in!" he said, calling out to my aunt, "Come quickly, your nephew is here!"

I went inside and greeted my aunt. "How are you? Did you come to Tehran all alone?" she asked, surprised.

"I'm going to Isfahan to work with my brother," I told her.

"Aren't you in school?"

"No," I replied, "I can't study anymore. I want to work." Her younger son, Majid, came downstairs to greet me, and I spent the night there.

Before heading out that morning, I went into the bathroom to hide my mother’s jewelry inside my socks. I also split my cash into several portions, stashing them in different pockets so that if I were pickpocketed, I wouldn't lose everything at once. After saying my goodbyes, I headed to a travel agency to buy a ticket. Once again, they refused to sell me one. As I stepped outside, I saw a bus attendant locking up a coach. I approached him and explained, "I need to get to Isfahan, but they won't sell me a ticket. Can you buy one for me?"

"Sure, I can," he replied. He took my money, went inside the agency, and never came back out. After a while, I wondered why he was taking so long. I went inside, but he was nowhere to be found; he had evidently slipped out through another exit. I waited for half an hour, but it was clear I had been swindled.

I returned to the agency and pleaded with them again. "I must get to Isfahan today; my brother is expecting me." One of the clerks suggested, "You’ll have to go stand on the Tehran-Qom highway. The buses heading to Qom that aren't full usually stop there to pick up extra passengers." I asked for the fare, took a taxi to the highway, and managed to board a bus to Qom. Upon arriving there, I asked for the road to Isfahan and continued my journey.

It was dusk by the time I reached Isfahan. Full of excitement, I took a taxi to my brother's workplace. I introduced myself to the people there who knew him and said, "I've come to see my brother." To my dismay, they told me, "Your brother has gone to Shiraz to visit your uncle."
Seeing my visible distress, one of them—a friend of my brother—offered, "If you don't have enough money to get to Shiraz, I can lend you some."
"I have money," I replied. Heavy-hearted, I left them and made my way toward the highway leading from Isfahan to Shiraz.

The Return and the Cold Welcome

On the road, a dark thought began to gnaw at me: *If I go to Shiraz and find my brother has moved on again, and my money runs out, what on earth will I do?* I would be trapped, with no way forward and no way back. Dejected, I decided to return to Tehran. I went back to the company where my brother worked and said to his friend, "I have the money, but I can't buy a ticket. Could you please help me get one for Tehran?" He agreed and bought me the ticket.
This time, I went straight from Isfahan to Tehran and took a taxi to my uncle's apartment to spend the night.
They lived on the second floor. I rang the bell, and after a few minutes, my uncle opened the door. He looked at me in shock. "What are you doing here alone at such a young age?" he asked. After we exchanged kisses, we headed upstairs. He opened the door and said playfully to his wife, "Look who's here!" My aunt stepped out of the kitchen, smiling when she saw me. "Oh, is it you, Mansour? Did you come all alone?"
"Yes," I replied. My uncle, sensing that my sudden appearance in Tehran was anything but ordinary, said to his wife, "If the tea is ready, bring us some so I can have a glass with my nephew."
She returned with two glasses of tea, clearly itching to find out the story behind my visit. "I went to Isfahan to see my brother," I explained, "but unfortunately, he had left for

Shiraz. I had to turn back to head to Rasht. Since it was late, I came to trouble you."
My aunt kept probing: "Aren't you in school?"
"No," I said, "I want to work."
My uncle always tried to keep things light with jokes, but my aunt was a stern woman. She turned to her husband and said, "Mansour was always mischievous, never one for studying." Then she began reminiscing about a story involving her son: "Remember when our son came first in his class? When they called his name for the prize, Mansour was the one who ran up to claim it!" They both burst into laughter.
A few hours passed. My cousin Abbas, who was my classmate, arrived. We greeted each other, and the next day we went to the second-hand market together. He needed to buy components to build a radio for a school project. After wandering the market for a few hours, I said my goodbyes and headed toward the terminal. After switching between several buses, I finally reached Rasht. I had no choice; I had to go home.
Terrified of what awaited me, I climbed the utility pole and leaped from the roof into the courtyard. I crept toward the window that looked into the room and saw my eldest brother, Ramin, sitting there. *If I go in now,* I thought, *he'll bind my hands and feet and they'll beat me senseless.* I quietly unbolted the door and slipped back out into the street. I wandered aimlessly through the city, waiting for dawn, hoping my brother would leave early.
I walked the back alleys until I had no strength left to move. It was drizzling, and I desperately needed a place to rest. I reached the mosque at the Mikaeil intersection. The entrance was relatively dry thanks to the overhang, so I sat there, tucked my legs against my chest, and tried to sleep. I don't know when I drifted off, but the call to prayer at dawn woke me. As worshippers began trickling in, I had to move on, returning to my aimless wandering through the alleys.
Eventually, I circled back home and began climbing the utility pole again. I was halfway up when the front door swung open; my brother, on his way out, spotted me. I jumped down instantly, keeping my distance so he couldn't grab me. I was ready to bolt when he spoke: "Where do you

think you're running to? Wherever you go, you'll eventually have to come back to this house. Now, come inside like a man and tell me what happened."
"You're going to beat me," I said.
"No, I won't," he replied.
"You're lying, you want to hit me."
"I said I won't," he insisted.
"Swear on our father's soul that you won't touch me?"
"I won't," he said, stepping back from the door. "Now, get inside."
Trembling with fear, I eased my way into the house. He followed and immediately bolted the door. Right there at the entrance, he began kicking me mercilessly. Hearing the commotion, my mother rushed out of the room, clutching a wooden club. When she saw me, she joined him, and they both set upon me. I struggled to break free, crying out for help, hoping a neighbor might hear. To stifle my screams, my brother dragged me across the floor into the inner room. Drenched in sweat from the exertion of the assault, they continued to beat me without mercy.
My mother kept striking my face with the wooden club; in her frenzy, she even hit my brother's leg by mistake several times. My brother, wearing his pointed shoes, rained kicks down on my lower back—as if he intended to paralyze me for life. To this day, I still suffer from that assault; I cannot sit on the floor like others do.
"What did you do with the jewelry and the money?" my mother shrieked.
"If you stop hitting me, I'll tell you," I managed to say.
Exhausted from the sheer effort of the beating, my brother finally stepped back. He held my mother back and demanded, "Tell us, where is it?"
I reached into my underwear and pulled out the small pouch I had concealed there. My mother snatched it and fumbled with the zipper. She saw that her gold and jewelry were untouched, but the cash was gone. "Where is the money?" she barked.
"I'll work and pay you back," I replied. Hearing this, she lunged at me again, but my brother intercepted her. "I'll pay you back your money," he said, finally putting an end to it.

I lay there sprawled on the floor, feeling as though every part of my body had been dismantled. I was broken, unable to move a single muscle.
In the days that followed, my mother spent most of her time out—visiting her sister, going to the mosque, or attending women's religious gatherings. I saw very little of her.
Meanwhile, my sister Rokhsareh, who had been living with her in-laws, had finally moved. Her husband had built a new house on Saffari Street in Rasht, and they had just finished moving in. Her husband worked late and usually spent his evenings with friends, rarely returning home before nightfall.

Living with My Sister and the Hypocrisy of the "Eldest"

My sister was pregnant and terrified of being alone in her new house, so she asked me to stay with her until she felt settled. I accepted gladly. Living with my mother—with the nails she hid in my food and her constant complaints to my brother, who never spared the rod—had become unbearable. Spending my evenings at my sister’s house offered a much-needed sanctuary from my mother’s presence. (Though, in later years, my sister would hold this over me, claiming, "I was the one who raised you.")
Because her husband was in charge of procurement for his office cafeteria, he often brought home prepared meals.
One Friday, when my eldest brother visited Rasht, my sister invited him for lunch. After the meal, as we sat in the living room, my brother-in-law pulled out his cigarettes and offered one to my brother. Apparently, he had realized that I had been sneaking smokes in the latrine, so he offered one to me as well. My brother protested immediately: "He’s still just a kid!" I turned pale and stammered, "Sir, I... I don't smoke."
My brother-in-law countered, "It’s better if he smokes here with us than out on the streets with the hoodlums." But my

brother wouldn't budge, insisting, "Mansour is not allowed to smoke."
Frustrated, my brother-in-law snapped at him, "Why are you kidding yourself? Have you counted how many times he's gone to the latrine since you arrived? He's clearly going there to smoke." My brother flared up in anger. I was certain he was about to jump up and beat me in front of my brother-in-law, but for some reason—perhaps some hidden leverage my brother-in-law held over him—he didn't. He simply asked, "Do you smoke?" and I lied, "No, I don't."
A few minutes later, the doorbell rang. It was one of my brother-in-law's friends. After the traditional greeting of "Ya Allah," he joined them in the parlor. A private meeting was clearly underway. I retreated to the kitchen to help my sister. My brother-in-law came in and told me, "Bring us some tea once it's brewed," then leaned in and whispered, "I left some cigarettes for you; go ahead and have one."
I went to the courtyard, smoked, and returned. "Is the tea ready to serve?" I asked my sister. She checked and said, "Give it another ten minutes."
I prepared the tray with three washed glasses, saucers, and the sugar bowl. I poured the tea and headed to the parlor. When I opened the door to serve them, I froze. There was my brother, holding something like a flute in one hand and a pair of tongs with a glowing coal in the other, pressing it against the "flute" and inhaling deeply.
As he lifted his head and exhaled a thick cloud of smoke, his eyes met mine. He was utterly mortified to be caught in that state. "Get out!" he barked at me, his voice lashing with anger.
My brother-in-law took the tray from my hands with a knowing smirk. "Thanks," he said. "You can go now."
I don't know if my brother-in-law intended for me to catch them in that state or if it was merely an accident, but I suspect it was deliberate. Whenever my brother visited, my sister would complain to him about her husband—how he stayed out late, prioritized his friends over his family, and neglected his domestic life.
My brother had confronted him several times about her unhappiness. My brother-in-law's response was always blunt: "Tell your sister I'm a social man; either I go to my

friends, or they come here." Eventually, it seemed my sister had relented, allowing his friends into their home.
That day, by inviting both his friend and my brother, he had essentially killed two birds with one stone. He wanted to ensure he could smoke opium in his own home without judgment, and more importantly, to prove to my sister that he wasn't the only one with this habit—her own brother was an addict too. He wanted to strip her of the right to complain to her brother ever again.
He had orchestrated it perfectly: inviting my brother to the parlor "so no one would find out," then sending me in with tea so I would witness the scene and tell my sister. It was a calculated move to ensure she would no longer feel ashamed of her husband's addiction, knowing her own brother shared the same vice.
Until that day, I hadn't even imagined my brother would smoke a cigarette, let alone opium. Seeing him hunched over the brazier made my stomach churn. In that moment, the man I had once feared and looked up to shrunk before my eyes until he was nothing.
Despite the brutal beatings he had given me, I still loved him. I had desperately wanted him to fill the void my father had left behind. But sitting there, seeing him exposed, I felt that same hollow ache I had experienced on the day my father died.

The Joyride: My First Time Behind the Wheel

A few weeks later, my eldest brother, Ramin, was again at my sister’s house. My other brother, Torab, had also come to Rasht on leave and was joining us for lunch. Torab had a peculiar habit: whenever he entered a house, he would immediately empty his pockets—wallet, keys, even loose change—and pile them on the TV set or a windowsill. When I asked him why, he’d simply say, "It’s a habit." Despite losing his things several times, he was lucky; people usually

found and returned them. That day was no different. As he settled in, my eyes fixed on his car keys.
After lunch, they retreated to the parlor to smoke opium—until then, I hadn't realized Torab shared the habit as well. I snatched the keys and headed for his *Citroën Dyane* (Zhiyan) parked right under my sister's window. I climbed in. This was the first time I had ever sat in the driver's seat, and the Dyane had a notoriously unique dashboard gear shift. I had always studied drivers' hands and feet closely, memorizing when they clutched and shifted. I turned the ignition; the engine roared to life. I engaged the gear and sped away.
I began weaving through the streets of Rasht. I even detoured through the *Sagharisazan* neighborhood, desperate for anyone who knew me to see me behind the wheel. One of the people who spotted me was Gholam, a friend of my eldest brother and a literature teacher. Unable to believe his eyes, he called my sister's house to check if he was hallucinating. "Where did you park your car?" he asked my brother. "Go check if it's still there. I just saw your little brother tearing down the street in it!" They rushed to the door and found the spot empty, stunned and unsure of what to do.
Just then, I pulled up. My fear had vanished, replaced by a sense of mastery as I smoothly parked the car in its original spot. They watched me in utter astonishment. Seeing that the car was unscathed, Torab managed to keep his temper in check, and for once, I escaped a beating. They peppered me with questions: "When did you learn to drive?" I simply replied, "This was my first time."
Torab went to the back to check his gear—he usually kept bedding, a portable camping stove, and cooking utensils there. Fortunately, everything was intact.
Once, while my eldest brother, my brother-in-law, and one of their friends were in the parlor, my brother-in-law called out, "Come here, I have a task for you." I walked in, and he told me to sit. My brother hesitated: "It's not right for the boy to sit by the opium brazier." But my brother-in-law countered, "Mansour is a man now."
They began questioning me: "Have you enrolled for the ninth grade?"

"No," I replied, "I don't have the heart for it; I can't stand sitting in a classroom."
"You don't need to attend," he said. "Just enroll, and I'll handle the rest. If you get your ninth-grade certificate, you can join the Navy."
I remember the Navy recruitment ads playing constantly back then. The TV showed Iranian warships docked at the pier, with young women cheering for the sailors in their crisp uniforms. They made it seem like joining the Navy was the ultimate way to win every girl's heart. At that age, I craved that kind of attention. "Alright," I told my brother-in-law, "I'll enroll."
"Go to such-and-such school tomorrow," he instructed. "My friend is the principal. Tell him I sent you." And that’s exactly what I did.
Somehow, through sheer struggle, I managed to finish the third year of high school. It was a critical moment; the educational system was changing, and if I had failed, I would have been trapped in the "New System" without a path back. Fortunately, the teachers passed everyone to spare us from that bureaucratic nightmare. Later, my brother-in-law joked, "I had to use the power of the opium pipe to squeeze those passing grades out of your teachers."
During those days, Haj Esmael’s Coffeehouse became my sanctuary. Located across from the Aqa Seyed Abbas Mosque, I’d head there straight after school. At first, I sat outside with the younger crowd, but as my brother and his friends began frequenting the place, I slowly moved inside. One of my brother’s friends, a literature teacher and a silver-tongued poet, would draw crowds of young men whenever he spoke.
I had a quiet friend whose father was a fruit seller; he eventually became a regular too. The coffeehouse turned into a hub for the local youth. A mustachioed man, clearly a dervish by the look of his facial hair, would come by several times a day selling lottery tickets. Someone whispered that he was actually an agent for **SAVAK** (the secret police), using the lottery tickets as a cover to eavesdrop on our conversations and see what the youth were up to.
One day, while we were sitting in the coffeehouse, the news anchor announced: "By the decree of His Imperial Majesty,

the Shahanshah Aryamehr, Great Captain of the Armed Forces, water has been nationalized."
Without thinking, I jumped up and cheered: "Hooray! From today on, drink as much water as you want until you burst!"
Suddenly, I noticed the lottery ticket seller leave the coffeehouse and call the owner outside. "Come out here, I need a word," he said. Through the window, I saw him pointing at us while whispering to the owner. After he left, the owner called me over. "What on earth were you thinking?" he asked, his voice trembling.
"What do you mean?" I asked.
"That mockery... saying 'drink until you burst'."
"What's the big deal?"
"That man wanted to take you away right then and there," the owner said. "I had to talk him out of it, telling him you're just a kid." Then he leaned in and whispered in my ear: "Seyed, watch your tongue. That man is with **SAVAK**. If I hadn't stepped in, you'd be gone by now. Whenever you see him, keep your mouth shut."
"Alright," I replied, though I could hardly believe a simple ticket seller could be a secret agent.
That was until the Revolution broke out. The people stormed the SAVAK headquarters, capturing agents and hanging some of them right at the gates. Those whose children had been tortured by SAVAK had now become the torturers themselves; they showed no mercy, even to the corpses. One person was shoving a stick into a dead agent's mouth, while another was piercing a stomach with a metal rod. It was on that day that I saw him—the lottery ticket seller—hanging among the others. Only then did I realize the coffeehouse owner had been telling the truth all along: he was indeed a SAVAK agent.

Arrested: The Night in the Holding Cell

One evening, several local boys were playing a game of street football in front of the Aqa Seyed Abbas Mosque

in *Sagharisazan*. I parked my bicycle inside the mosque's shoe-room and sat on the steps to watch the match. Suddenly, two police cars screeched to a halt, just like in the movies. Four officers leaped out and began chasing the boys. Everyone scattered, but I stayed right where I was on the steps, refusing to budge.

When the officers failed to catch the runners, two of them lunged at me. They grabbed me firmly by both arms and told me, with a string of insults, that I had to get into the car. I protested: "I wasn't even playing! I was just watching. Why are you taking me? If you were any good at your jobs, you'd have caught the ones who actually ran." They ignored me and tried to force me into the vehicle.

When they couldn't budge me, they called for backup. Even with three officers shoving and pulling, I held my ground. At that moment, the local coffeehouse owner, *Haj Esmael*—so named because he was born on the Feast of Sacrifice—stepped up to the car. Seeing the struggle, he pleaded with me to stop resisting, promising he would come to the station shortly to get me released.

I listened to him. "Tell them to let go of my arms then, and I'll get in myself," I said. Because they knew Haj Esmael, they complied. I climbed into the car, and we drove to the police station.

At the station, they shoved me into the duty officer's room. In front of the officer and a guard, they conducted a body search, confiscating everything: my bicycle key, my house keys, and even my belt, all of which went into a plastic bag. I looked at the officer and said, "My bike is sitting in the mosque's shoe-room, and you have the key. If someone steals it, you're responsible." Infuriated, he snapped, "Shut up!"

Then they threw me into a holding cell—a cramped, dark room with a heavy iron door and a tiny barred peephole. Two men were there, huddled in blankets and fast asleep. I started making a racket until I woke them up. They shouted for the guards to take me away. An officer opened the peephole and barked, "Are you going to be quiet, or do I have to make you quiet?"

"I haven't done anything! Why am I here?" I demanded.

"You're our guest tonight," he sneered, before slamming the shutter closed.
I started making a racket again, refusing to let them sleep. The heavy iron door swung open, and I was hauled back into the duty officer's room. There, I saw a man named Zahiri, whom I already knew. He was shouting at the officer: "If you don't care about yourself, at least think of your wife and children! This boy is a *Seyed*; if his ancestors come for you, they'll ruin your entire lineage! If it wasn't for him, I would have lost my own child."
The duty officer, clearly rattled by these words, ordered the guards to return my belongings. They handed over my keys, and as I buckled my belt, I looked the officer in the eye. "I did nothing wrong," I said firmly. "You arrested me and threw me in there for no reason. Now, you owe me an apology." The officer was fuming, caught between anger and hesitation, when Zahiri turned to me. "Seyed jan," he said softly, "I apologize to you on their behalf. Please, forgive me." Seeing this, the officer managed a forced, tense smile and muttered, "I apologize too. Now, go."
As Zahiri and I walked out into the station courtyard, the officer who had gripped my arm so violently earlier stepped out of a room. "Wait! Where do you think you’re going?" he barked.
"He’s been released," Zahiri shot back.
I rolled up my sleeve, pointed to the dark bruises left by his fingers on my arm, and said, "This is your handiwork. We'll be seeing each other again."
A few days later, while I was sitting in front of Haj Esmael’s coffeehouse, I saw that same officer passing by in a police car with his partner. He spotted me and told his friend, "Stop the car." He climbed out and walked toward me. At first, I thought he was coming to harass me again, but instead, he took my face in his hands, kissed me, and sincerely asked for my forgiveness.
Now, let me tell you about Mr. Zahiri and my "Ancestral Curse." Mr. Zahiri was a notorious figure in Rasht, widely known as a "Javid-Shah" (Long Live the Shah) loyalist. Whenever there was a royal celebration or a national holiday, he would pin several medals to his chest and march through the streets, chanting, "Long live the Shah! Long

live the Shah!" He had connections in high places and acted as a "fixer" for government offices—if someone had a bureaucratic problem, he'd resolve it in exchange for a bribe.

I remember it was during the month of Muharram; I was busy wiring the mosque and setting up the courtyard lights when Mr. Zahiri approached me. "Do you know how to do building wiring?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied.

"I mean, can you fully wire a brand-new house from scratch?"

"I can."

"Then I'm entrusting the electrical work of my new home to you," he declared. I accepted.

A few days later, he came by to take me to the site so we could list the necessary materials. We went to an electrical shop in *Sagharisazan* to buy the supplies. The shop owner told us, "I don't have everything in stock; come back the day after tomorrow." But the day came and went, and Mr. Zahiri never showed up.

Two weeks passed before I saw him again. He looked distraught. He begged for my forgiveness and asked me to pray for his child's recovery. "Why are you so upset?" I asked, confused. "What happened? Why do you need my forgiveness?"

He confessed, "That day, when I went to pick up the supplies, the shop owner warned me: 'If you leave your electrical work to this kid and your house catches fire, who will pay for the damages? You need someone with a shop and established credit.' I got scared and let him do the job instead."

The shop owner had finished the wiring, but the very day the job was completed, Zahiri's daughter fell gravely ill. They rushed her to the doctor, but he couldn't find a cause for her ailment and refused to prescribe any medicine. Her condition worsened. "I know it's my fault," Zahiri lamented. "I broke my word to you, and your curse has struck my child. I am ready to pay you whatever damages you want. Please, come with me to my daughter's bedside and pray for her to get well." I simply smiled and said, "I swear to God, I never cursed you.

I went with him to his house and prayed to God for his child’s speedy recovery. The following day, he came to the mosque to find me, carrying a box of sweets and beaming with joy. "When my daughter woke up this morning," he announced, "there was no trace of the illness left!" He began distributing the sweets to the people, telling everyone, "This Seyed’s prayers brought my child back to me." From then on, he held a deep fear of me, terrified of falling under my "curse" again. It was this very fear that compelled him to come to the police station to rescue me from the officers—though it was Haj Esmael, the coffeehouse owner, who had initially urged him to intervene.

I was full of energy and sharp-witted. If something caught my interest, I would immediately try to replicate or build it. Every time I went to the cinema, I would learn something new and bring it to life. After seeing the film Agha Mehdi Pashne Tala, I painted the heels of my shoes gold. After watching The Tiger of Mazandaran, I crafted my own leather wristbands; soon, people were paying me to make sets for them as well.

One of my eldest brother’s "talents," however, was taking my handmade wristbands and shredding them with scissors. He would then bestow a beating upon me for good measure. His mantra was always: "Don't do this, don't do that." His only interaction with me was rifling through my pockets to find something to use against me. He never once suggested what I *should* do. His role was to destroy what I had built, never to point toward a proper path in life. Not once did he sit me down to offer advice or say, "Since you aren't in school, let's find you a trade." He treated me like a street urchin, oblivious to where I slept at night, what I ate, or how I survived. The only language he knew was violence.

Every road had led to a dead end. The circumstances had become so dire that I felt invisible to the world. I was caught in a profound crisis; I had no helper, no protector—no father, no mother, no brother, or sister to turn to. None of my family knew who had looked after me after my father’s death and my mother’s displacement. None of them knew how I earned my living. The only things in abundance around me were opium, alcohol, and gambling...

It was during this era of crisis that **Karate** first became a trend. Bruce Lee had become the idol of every young athlete. After watching a few martial arts films, I began training in Karate, dedicating myself to it for some time.
In the afternoons, my only sanctuary was that coffeehouse, where the crowd of young regulars grew larger by the day. Haj Esmael's tea seemed to get paler with every passing week. He had a way of brewing the same leaves three times over, yet somehow, it still tasted good. He kept three teapots lined up on a three-wick stove; no one was allowed to touch them or pour their own, as each pot followed a strict accounting and order.
First thing in the morning, he would brew the first pot for the local shopkeepers. When that was spent, he'd refill it with hot water and move it to the second position, starting a fresh batch in the first pot. Regulars and established merchants always got tea from the first pot; known locals sitting inside got the second; and strangers or passersby were served from the third. After the third brewing, he would spread the spent leaves on a cloth in his courtyard to dry. Once dried, he'd mix them with a bit of tea dust and sell it back to people as "premium grade" tea.
We knew exactly what we were drinking, but we enjoyed it nonetheless. Whenever he was idle, he'd pour us glass after glass. As a steady customer, I'd settle my tab at the end of the day. "I had twelve teas," I'd say. "Fifteen!" he'd bark back. He did this to all the boys—always adding a few extra glasses to the bill. We paid without complaint because we had nowhere else to go. He knew we were so addicted to the atmosphere that we'd consume whatever swill he served us. And truthfully, it did taste good.
I made new friends there. Taxi drivers would drop by to recount their dramas with passengers, and in the mornings, construction laborers gathered to vent about their struggles. It was a kaleidoscope of diverse stories. Addicts and minors under eighteen were technically banned; if an addict wanted tea, they had to sit outside. Since I was underage, whenever a stranger walked in, I'd slip out immediately, fearing they might be an undercover agent.
Next to the coffeehouse was a dead-end alley. Inside lived a man who was the managing editor of the Taleb-e

Haq magazine and a board member of the mosque (people whispered he was with SAVAK). Opposite his house was a notary office for public records, marriages, and divorces. At the very end of the alley stood a wooden door, always bolted shut, hiding a vast garden whose main entrance opened onto a different street.

Meeting Khosrow, Mahmoud, and the "Per-Centimeter" Bread

One day, while we were sitting in the coffeehouse, a slender young man walked in and greeted everyone. He ordered a tea and offered it to the others. Standing there, he reached into his pocket, pulled out a pack of Winston cigarettes, and passed them around. Then he introduced himself: "My name is Khosrow. I've started working at the notary office down the alley." I liked him instantly; he was calm, polite, and sharp. He was also a few years older than me.

Slowly, we became friends, forming a trio. Later, another young man named Mahmoud joined us. He said he worked at a school and would come by in the evenings to pick up Khosrow. Now, there were four of us.

At that coffeehouse, there was always a pot of warm, ready-to-serve beans (Lobia). No one really knew exactly when Haj Esmael had started cooking them, but he would swear to everyone they were fresh from that day. Next to the pot were several loaves of *Barbari* bread and a large knife. You paid for the bread based on the size of the piece you cut; as my friends used to joke, the price was "per centimeter." Whenever the beans were fresh, we'd have bread and beans there for an afternoon snack. Other times, we'd head to the nearby liver stall to eat *Vavishka* (a local Gilani dish) or grilled liver.

My eldest brother also used to meet his friends at that same coffeehouse whenever he traveled from Qazvin to Rasht. Once, while he was there with his circle, they met Khosrow and took a liking to him. They noted that he was well-read and intellectual.

My Guardian: The Addict Teacher

By those days, there was no trace of my mother. No one knew where she had gone, and frankly, no one missed her enough to go looking. I lived entirely alone in my father’s house. My eldest brother only visited Rasht once a week, and whenever he saw me, his sole interaction was to rifle through my pockets. If he found a small knife, brass knuckles, a wristband, or even a nail clipper with a fold-out blade, he would berate me. He never once paused to ask *why* I carried such things.

The neighborhood was swarming with hoodlums and thugs. I had to carry a pocketknife or brass knuckles just to defend myself.

Then, one day, it seemed he suddenly remembered he had a younger brother to look after. But since he "didn't have the time" himself, he outsourced my guardianship to one of his addicted friends. He told me:

"I’ve given some money to my friend, the literature teacher, so he can give you a daily allowance of five Rials. He’s newly married with a baby, but his wife found out about his addiction and threatened to divorce him if he doesn't quit. He’s decided to clean up, but since he can’t quit cold turkey, he’s allowed to come to our house to smoke his opium and gradually taper off."

It was only then that I realized all three of my brother's closest friends were addicts. At the time, the whole neighborhood praised them, calling them such "fine, healthy young men." No one could believe they were hooked on drugs. When they walked together through the streets, people admired them; they were educated, well-dressed, and of equal height. They even coordinated their outfits. They were inseparable.

I asked my brother, "Why don't you just make an extra key so he can let himself in?"

"I want him to keep an eye on you, too," he replied.

I had no choice. Every day, I had to open the door of my home to an addict. I was an inexperienced teenager and it

never crossed my mind that I was becoming a victim of my brother's terrible judgment. How could he, as the adult, not realize that putting me by that man's opium brazier could lead me to a grim fate? He had assigned someone to watch over me who desperately needed watching over himself.
An addict only thinks of his addiction; he wants everything and everyone to serve that single purpose. Every day after school, my brother's friend would head home, have a bite to eat, and tell his wife that a teacher's salary wasn't enough to make ends meet—that he needed to moonlight as a taxi driver for a few hours. In the evenings, he'd pick me up from the coffeehouse in his *Zhiyan* (Citroën Dyane), and we'd head to our house. Once he had smoked his opium, he'd set out to drive passengers to cover the next day's expenses.
One time he told me, "Business hasn't been good. Women are afraid to get into the car because I'm alone. I want you to sit in the front seat so people think you're my son. It might make them feel more secure and encourage them to get in."
He was right. Once I started sitting in the front, the number of passengers increased. His wife was beautiful, but he was a womanizer nonetheless. I remember once, three women in chadors were waiting for a taxi by the roadside. He screeched to a halt in front of them. "Where to?"
"The lightbulb factory," they replied and climbed in. On the way, he began using his silver-tongued charm to flirt with them.
I was getting tired and rested my hand on the back of the seat. One of the passengers, a girl younger than the others, seemed to notice me and smiled. Feeling shy, I looked away. My brother's friend continued his smooth talking until we reached their destination. As they were leaving, the girl looked back at the car.
"Did you see that?" he asked with a grin, "She was definitely paying attention to us."
"She was nice," I replied, though the situation felt a bit strange to me.
He seemed thrilled by the interaction. The next day, we made sure to arrive at the same spot early so they wouldn't catch another ride. When the three women appeared and

saw us waiting, they got in again. Throughout the drive, he kept checking the rearview mirror, trying to catch the younger girl's eye. When we dropped them off, he told her, "I'll be here for you tomorrow, too." She nodded in agreement.

The next day when we arrived, she was alone; her friends were nowhere to be found.

"Where are the other two?" Gholam asked.

With a smirk, she replied, "They were just in the way."

It seemed she had convinced herself this man was her "dream find." When we arrived, she offered to pay the fare, but my brother's friend refused. He got out of the car, walked over to her, and whispered something I couldn't hear. Then he got back in.

The following day, he told me to stay home until he arrived. I was waiting when I heard a knock. I opened the door and found that same young woman standing there with him. Gholam turned to her and said, "Go inside and wait in the room until I join you."

She walked in with an air of flirtation. Gholam then pleaded with me to stay out in the courtyard so he could "talk" to her.

"You have a wife," I countered. "What could you possibly need to talk to her about? Does she even know you're married, or does she think you're going to propose?"

He insisted so much that I finally gave in and stayed in the yard. My heart was racing with anxiety; I was terrified that if anything happened—if he crossed a line—he might pin the blame on me since it was my family home. Unable to stay still, I crept silently to the window. My fears were confirmed: it was far beyond "talking." They were in each other's arms. I felt paralyzed, unsure of what to do. I sat on the steps, waiting until they finally emerged.

The woman seemed completely unfazed; she even smiled, as if she expected something from me too. Gholam said, "Come on, let's go drop her off at work."

I refused. "Stay here then until I get back," he muttered.

He returned half an hour later and asked, "Why the long face?"

"You told me you just wanted to talk!" I snapped.

"Well," he replied with chilling nonchalance, "we did talk."

"I saw what you were doing," I said. "My brother asked you to look after me, but it seems someone needs to look after *you*. If you ever bring a woman into this house again, I'm telling my brother."
He left in a huff, but he showed up again the next day, once again starting his smooth-talking routines.
« "I told that girl she had to be with you too, and she agreed," he said, trying to entice me.
"No thanks," I replied firmly. "But if you bring her to the house again, I'm telling my brother."
"Come on, you're a man now," he scoffed. "What kind of talk is that? You're young; this is the best time of your life. You should be enjoying yourself."
I remained silent.
"Fine," he muttered. "No need to tell your brother."
The next day, when he saw the woman waiting by the roadside, he asked, "Do you mind if I pick her up?"
"Go ahead," I said, "on one condition: you drop me off first."
He didn't pick her up. After a few hours of driving passengers, he said, "I've made enough for the baby's milk. That's enough for today."
We went home, and he began his habit. Despite being much younger and feeling awkward about advising him, I felt a deep pity for his wife. "How long do you plan to keep this up?" I asked. "If you don't care about yourself, at least care for your family. You're indulging in these habits and chasing women. Aren't you afraid of the consequences for your health and your wife?"
I continued, "You're a teacher. Isn't it a shame to be driving for milk money? What if one of your students sees you? Wouldn't it hurt if they told the whole class their teacher moonlights as a driver after school?"
These words finally hit home; he looked ashamed and promised to gradually change his ways.
"I want to stop," he said the next day, "but only if you help me."
"How can I help?"
"It's simple. You keep track of my supply. I'll divide it into small pellets—the size of peas. Give me five a day this week, then four the next, and so on until I'm clean."

The agreement was made. That day, he took five pellets and handed the rest of the jar over. He used the first, second, and third while talking. As he started the fourth, an excuse was made to go to the courtyard. Peeking through the window, he was seen hurriedly opening the jar, snatching a couple more pellets, and closing it back up.
Upon returning and sitting across from him, laughter was uncontrollable.
"What is it? Why are you laughing?" he asked repeatedly.
"Because today," was the reply, "is the first time I've ever seen a man steal from himself!"
"What do you mean?"
The jar was slid toward him. "This all belongs to you. There's no need to steal it."
He was overcome with shame. "The decision to cut back hasn't even been made yet," he was told, "let alone quitting."
At that moment, he shook his head to brush off some coal dust. Then, in a rush, he lifted the kettle off the kerosene stove and blew hard to extinguish the flame. But the flame leaped upward, searing his face. He screamed, clutching his face in his hands. A bucket was quickly filled at the water pump.
"Put your head in the bucket!"
He was too terrified to move his hands from his face. "Do it now," was the urgent call, "before it's too late! Get water on your face!
When he finally took his hands away, I saw that the damage wasn't as bad as it seemed. Only part of his mustache, eyebrows, and a bit of his hair had been singed. He splashed water on his face and stared at his reflection in the mirror, looking utterly defeated. He immediately set to work with a razor, desperately trying to shave away the evidence before his wife could see what a mess he’d made of himself.
This incident was the spark that made me want to fight back against drugs...
From that day on, I began tailing the addicts to see where they bought their supply, who the dealers were, and where they went to use. After some time playing the scout, I

discovered that one of their primary haunts for using was public latrines—specifically, the one at our local mosque.
I then spent several days keeping a dealer under close surveillance. It was fascinating to see that most of these dealers weren't addicts themselves. I watched as an addict would approach the dealer and hand over the cash. Then, the dealer would lean in and give him directions: "I've tucked it under the brick at such-and-such spot; go grab it."
Every morning, the dealer would stash his goods in various hiding spots before taking up his post in front of the coffeehouse or at the corner of the alley. When a buyer approached, they'd walk together for a few paces, the money would change hands, and the dealer would provide the location of one of the stashes. He never handed the drugs directly to the buyer. This meant that whenever the police searched him, they found nothing to prove he was dealing, and he'd be released.
The buyer would then confidently head to the secret spot to retrieve his fix. Since I had a knack for this kind of thrill, I spent a few days shadowing the dealer like a young **James Bond**, gradually uncovering several of his hiding places. One of those very hideouts turned out to be the latrine of our mosque.
One day, I saw a man enter the mosque's latrine and emerge almost instantly. I thought to myself, *He couldn't have finished his business that quickly.* Once he left, I went inside and searched. At first, I found nothing, but then I noticed a small transom window near the ceiling. I stepped onto the water tap, hauled myself up, and spotted a small package. I opened it to find a tiny amount of powder. Terrified that the police might find it and trace my fingerprints, I tucked it back into its hiding place. Later, when my brother's friend, Gholam, picked me up for our usual driving shift, I told him the story.
"Well, what did you do with it?" he asked.
"I got scared and put it back," I said.
He looked alarmed. "Why did you touch it? If the police find your prints, you're finished! You must go back and get it immediately so I can dispose of it."
I went back and retrieved the package for him. He took it, saying, "Wait right here, I'll be back."

Half an hour later, he returned, looking satisfied. "That was incredible! Pure stuff!"
"What was it?" I asked.
"Pure, uncut heroin," he replied nonchalantly.
It seemed it didn't matter to him what it was; he would consume anything he could get his hands on.
My routine continued: waiting for him to pick me up, driving for passengers, and then watching him smoke opium at our house. After he got his fix, he would usually give me my five-Rial allowance. Gradually, however, he began to "forget." It started with missing a day, then two, then three. I was too shy to ask for it. Whenever he did remember, he'd dismiss it: "Oh, I forgot. But you didn't say anything..."
One day, my brother Ramin asked me, "Does Gholam give you your daily allowance regularly?"
"Yes," I lied.
"How much did he give you last week?"
"Twenty Rials (Two Tomans)," I replied.
"Why only twenty? It should have been thirty-five!"
"Maybe he forgot," I muttered.
The following week, when I told him I'd only received fifteen Rials, my brother grew furious. He confronted Gholam, their relationship soured, and they had a falling out.
Instead of admitting his fault, Gholam blamed me. He pressured me to tell my brother that I was the one who had made the mistake, not him. I tried to fix it by telling Ramin, "It was my fault; he did give me the money," but my brother didn't buy it. "He is no longer allowed in this house to smoke his opium," Ramin declared.
I was consumed by guilt. I blamed myself for telling my brother the truth. I kept thinking that a few Tomans weren't worth destroying a years-long friendship. I couldn't convince myself that it wasn't my fault. I spent days avoiding Gholam until he finally cornered me. "Why are you avoiding me?" he demanded. "You've blocked every path for me to reconcile with your brother. At least don't you be angry with me, so I can use you to win back his friendship."

His words put an immense psychological pressure on me. No matter how much I tried, I couldn't forgive myself for their separation.
I sat alone in my father’s house, a lump in my throat so heavy it felt like it was choking me. I cried for a long time. I couldn't tell if I was weeping because their friendship had ended, or if that was merely an excuse to mourn my own absolute loneliness and lack of anyone to turn to. I didn't leave the house or eat a single bite until eleven at night. Finally, driven by hunger, I stepped out and headed toward the *Sagharisazan* neighborhood. At that hour, only one shop was still open: "Ali Kordeh’s," the man who always told me my hand brought him luck and insisted I buy from him every day.
I walked in and asked, "Do you have any Aspirin?"
"Yes," he said, holding the bottle. "How many do you want?"
"How many do you have?"
He counted them. "Nineteen."
"No more?"
"No," he replied, then joked, "What, are you planning a suicide?"
"None of your business," I muttered. I bought all nineteen and walked out.
On the way, I told myself: 'Nineteen must be enough for suicide, because a while ago one of the local kids who had fallen for a girl —and the girl's family had found out and warned him to stay away —tried to commit suicide by taking fifteen aspirin tablets. They took him to the hospital and saved him by pumping his stomach. So nineteen must be one hundred percent enough.'
While I was very hungry, I walked toward Park-e Shahr and swallowed the pills one by one without water until they were finished. Near Park-e Shahr, I saw a kiosk was open. I went and got a glass of water and drank it. Then I entered the park and lay down on one of the benches. I closed my eyes and waited for death. Moment by moment, I thought I was getting closer to death and getting rid of this situation forever. About an hour passed; I saw there was no sign of death and nothing happened. I said to myself: 'Maybe these pills were old and had lost their properties.' Now I don't know if my body had become cold that night because of the pills or if the weather was cold; I couldn't sleep and was forced to get up from the bench to go home and sleep. Maybe death would come to me.
On the way, I saw a shop was open. I went and asked: 'Do you

have aspirin?' He said: 'Yes, how many?' I said: 'Ten.' He looked and saw he had no more than six. I said: 'Okay, give me those same six.' I took the pills and walked home. I took the pills with water and then spread my quilt and mattress toward the Qibla and lay down. A few minutes later, I told myself it's better to write a letter so that after my death no one thinks they caused it. I got up, picked up paper and a pen, and wrote a few lines for my brother: 'Yes, I was the one at fault for your friendship breaking up. Since childhood, I was always a cause of bother and distress for you, but now I am removing myself from your way so you can live without problems...' I put the letter under the pillow and slept to see what news there is in the other world.

Suddenly, I felt someone pounding violently on the door. I struggled to get up, swaying as I tried to figure out who it was. As I stumbled out of the room, a thought flashed through my mind: *What is happening? I'm supposed to be dead by now.* I was utterly dazed. Then, I remembered the note I had tucked under my pillow. The pounding continued. I rushed back, grabbed the letter, and went to the door barefoot.

It was my eldest brother, Ramin, and one of his friends. "What's going on? Where have you been?" he demanded.

"Nothing happened; I haven't been anywhere," I muttered.

"The coffeehouse owner said he hasn't seen you for two days! Why are you so pale? What happened? Are you sick?" He peppered me with questions while I stood there, still disoriented, wondering if I was actually alive or not. He kept pressing: "I'm talking to you! Where were you these past two days?"

I thought to myself: Does this mean I slept for two whole days and didn't die? What about those twenty-five pills? I felt weak and hollow from not eating. "It's nothing," I told him. "I just felt a bit ill and was resting." Surprisingly, there was no beating this time; they simply left.

I got dressed and headed to *Saghari-sazan*, to "Tooti's Ash Shop," which sat across from a bakery known for its delicious bread. I bought some poppy seed bread, ate it with *Ash Shala-Qalamkar*, and finally felt the life returning to my body. Then, I went to Haj Esmael's for tea. One of my friends asked, "Where were you? On a trip?"

"No, just around," I replied.

"Well, you've been missing for two days. Your brother was

asking everyone for you."
"I wasn't feeling well," I said. "I'm better now."
Around four or five o'clock, my friend Mohammad-Ali arrived, followed shortly by Khosrow. They asked the same questions. Khosrow looked at me intently. "Are you having family trouble?"
"No," I joked, "just fell in love..."
After tea, the three of us took a walk. Khosrow asked, "What books have you read so far?"
Mohammad-Ali named a few titles. I said, "I'm not a book person; even my schoolbooks are always brand new."
"I'm not talking about schoolbooks," Khosrow clarified.
"Then what?"
"Tomorrow," he said, "I'll bring a book for you and one for Mohammad-Ali. Read them first, and then we'll discuss them together.
The next day, Khosrow brought two books. One was by Sadegh Hedayat; "This one is a bit heavy," he remarked, handing it to Mohammad-Ali. The other was by **Aziz Nesin**, which he gave to me. "You have one week to read this," he said. "Then, I want to hear your thoughts on it."
He warned us not to show the books to anyone, as they were "forbidden." The moment I heard that word, my mind began to race, imagining what could be hidden inside those pages. I took the book and told him, "I'll take this home quickly and come right back so we can hang out." By the time I returned, he was gone. My curiosity was piqued; I went back home again, desperate to understand why this book was so dangerous. To prove to myself that I had a capacity for things others might not, I opened the book and began to read. Within a few hours, I had finished it. I found it fascinating and went through it once more.
The next day, I told him, "I've read the book. I didn't see anything particularly 'forbidden' about it. It was all just jokes and funny stories. Why did you say not to show it to anyone?" Mohammad-Ali hadn't arrived yet. Khosrow suggested, "Let's go sit on the mosque steps." Once we were settled, he tried to explain: "The author has turned the systemic problems of society into satire. What you think is just a joke is actually a bitter reality, masked as humor."

I recounted one of the stories and asked, "For example, what does he mean by this one?" Khosrow then began to explain the country's issues and grievances as he understood them. As I listened, it finally clicked why my father had been so dissatisfied with the state of things. It reminded me of a day when, after getting into a typical fight with the neighborhood kids, my father had locked me in the small back room of his shop as punishment. My eldest brother, who was then serving his term in the *Sepah-e Danesh* (Education Corps), had taken leave and come to the shop to consult with my father. He had no idea I was imprisoned right there in the back.

My eldest brother began recounting his achievements to my father: "I did some beautiful decorations for a celebration at the barracks, and everyone was impressed. A very important guest who came to visit the base commended me and said they want to grant me a scholarship to go to Japan, funded by the Royal Court, to continue my studies." I was watching them through a gap in the curtain. My father looked intently at my brother's face and asked, "And what is your opinion?" He replied, "Well, if you give me permission, I will go."

Upon hearing this, my father became furious. "Shame on the milk your mother fed you!" he spat. "I have struggled all my life to put honest, Halal bread on your table, and now you want to turn it all into Haram? Go, do whatever damn thing you want!" My brother, shaken, abandoned the idea of going to Japan. This scene was forever etched in my mind. I kept asking myself: What is the story? Why did my father get so angry? What is it about the Shah and the Court that caused such rage? This was exactly what Khosrow was slowly making me understand. Step by step, he was introducing me to the world of politics.

One day, Khosrow mentioned he had a small errand at his house and asked me to join him. I agreed. His mother was home, and Khosrow walked straight into his room to grab something without even greeting her. His mother turned to me and pleaded, "For the love of God, please talk some sense into him." She continued, "Khosrow’s father is a humble cobbler; we bought this tiny house with such hardship. Now Khosrow is pressuring us to sell it so he can

buy a motorcycle with the money." I was deeply saddened by this, but because I valued my friendship with Khosrow so much, I said nothing to him.

You're Still a Mama's Boy": The Night in City Park

One day, Khosrow looked at me and said, "If you don't smoke hashish, you're just a mama's boy." He then told Mohammad-Ali and me, "Tonight, I'm meeting my friends at Rasht's City Park. I'm inviting you both to come and meet them." We agreed and headed to the rendezvous point that night. Three of Khosrow's friends were there, including Mahmoud, whom we had met before. They arrived on large, black motorcycles. After introductions, they brought out a tape recorder, sat on the grass, and played Dariush's song, *"Booy-e Gandom"* (The Scent of Wheat).
One of them emptied several cigarettes and pulled a small piece of something from his pocket. He placed it between two matches, lit another to warm it up, and then crumbled it into the tobacco before stuffing it back into the empty cigarette papers and twisting the ends shut. He lit one, took two deep drags, and passed it to the next person. After the next man took his two puffs, he handed it to Mohammad-Ali. My friend took his turn and then handed it to me. Without inhaling, I passed it to Khosrow and said, "I'm not into this."
Khosrow shot me a look. "I thought you had grown up," he sneered. "I didn't realize you still smelled of your mother's milk. Why did you even come here?"
"I came for you," I replied.
"You made a mistake," Khosrow snapped. "This isn't a place for kids." He began to humiliate me in front of his friends, making me feel utterly small. I turned to my old friend Mohammad-Ali and said, "Let's go and leave them to it." But Mohammad-Ali, ever the opportunist, replied, "I'm staying. You go if you want."
Khosrow seized the moment, hitting me right where it hurt —my deep affection for him. "If you leave now," he

threatened, "we're finished. Don't ever come back to me." I felt I had no choice but to sit back down. Khosrow lit the second cigarette, handed it to me, and said, "Now, you start."

I took one puff and tried to hand it back, but he stopped me. "Don't rush. Take another; the rule is two drags." I took a second puff and passed it to him. Then came the next cigarettes, one after another.

As the high kicked in, the night turned into a blur of jokes and mockery. We stayed in the park until very late. Eventually, Khosrow's friends on the motorcycles said their goodbyes and left. Mohammad-Ali, Khosrow, Mahmoud, and I began walking toward our homes, still joking and fooling around under the fading night sky.

The next thing I knew, the scorching heat and the glare of the sun jolted me awake. At first, I thought I was in my own bed, but as I lifted my head from the ground, I realized we were all sprawled out on the grass in the middle of Golsar Square.

The following day, the truth about why Khosrow was pressuring his family to buy him a motorcycle became clear; his friends all had bikes, and he was obsessed with the outlaw image of Reza Motori. Khosrow had lied to his mother, claiming he studied at night because he had to work during the day to pay his tuition. He had told me the same—that he couldn't attend school because his fees were unpaid.

To ease the burden on his family, I sold my own bicycle and gave him the money for his tuition. But it seemed the money went toward hashish instead; the fees remained unpaid. I even went as far as borrowing money from my brother. When he asked what it was for, I told him, "For my friend, Khosrow." Since my brother considered Khosrow a "good kid," he gave it to me. Again, Khosrow didn't pay the school. Instead, he kept relentlessly pressuring his parents to sell their home to buy him that motorcycle. Being an only child, his parents were slowly giving in to his demands.

Khosrow would often mock me, saying: "You work so hard at the mosque during Muharram and Safar, yet why doesn't your *Aqa Seyed Abbas* solve your problems? These ignorant people toil away only to throw their money into the shrine,

hoping for a miracle. The 'Saint' doesn't heal anyone; that money just lines the pockets of those parasitic clerics who do nothing but make people cry. Why don't they give it to us so we can pay our tuition or buy a motorcycle?"

The Heist at Shahpour School Library

One day, Khosrow told Mohammad-Ali and me that he was hunting for two specific books. He had searched every bookstore, but they were nowhere to be found. He claimed both were in the library of **Shahpour School** and was determined to get them at any cost. Khosrow insisted the library held many valuable books; by selling them, he could pay off his debts, cover his tuition, and finally buy his motorcycle. He recruited us to help him "retrieve" them, claiming he had already scouted the school grounds. We agreed.
"I'll draw up the plan tonight," Khosrow said. "Tomorrow, we'll go over it and practice. We strike on Friday night when the school is deserted." The next day, he presented

the map and answered our questions. We decided to meet at 10 PM on Friday at a small shop in a side street near the school to execute the plan.
I arrived ten minutes early and waited. After a soda, Khosrow appeared, followed shortly by Mohammad-Ali. We moved toward the back wall of the school. Khosrow leaned against the wall, cupping his hands to give me a boost. With his and Mohammad-Ali's help, I scaled the wall. From the top, I helped pull Khosrow up, who was carrying a large canvas bag.
After scouting the courtyard, we hopped inside. Mohammad-Ali stayed outside as a lookout, ready to signal us if a patrol or anyone suspicious approached. We crept toward the main entrance and began working on the door when a voice suddenly pierced the silence: "Who’s there? Who is it?" We bolted. Several figures began chasing us. We were lucky the school gate hadn't been fully locked; apparently, the school janitor had guests that night and had left it slightly ajar. We threw the gate open, escaped, and met up with Mohammad-Ali to tell him we had failed. It was only after walking for half an hour that we realized we had left the large canvas bag—the one meant for the books—right by the building's entrance.
That night, we went home empty-handed. From then on, we spent even more time together, and our hashish habit became a daily routine.

The Heist Inside the Shrine

It all started when I told Khosrow about how the shrine's caretaker was stealing from the donations. Khosrow's eyes lit up. "Good for him!" he exclaimed. "Better that he and his kin eat than that money lining the pockets of those parasites. Why didn't we think of that ourselves?"
"Think of what?" I asked.
"Stealing from the shrine," he said coolly.
"No, it's too dangerous," I countered.
"What's so dangerous about it?"
"It's a holy site! My entire lineage will be cursed and destroyed."
He laughed. "You're so naive! Do you really think that money goes to the Saint? Isn't it better if I use that money to study and become a doctor than for a bunch of freeloaders to feast on it? Besides, once I'm successful, I'll pay back every cent we take from the shrine. How does that sound?"
"I need to think about it," I muttered.
"Think about it?" he mocked. "Just admit you're scared!"
A few days later, Khosrow told me, "My mother has invited you for lunch." I was happy to accept. His mother was a

deeply kind woman; whenever I compared her to my own mother, my heart ached for her.
During lunch at their home, she pleaded with me, "Please, talk some sense into my son." Then she turned to me and asked, "Do you also pressure your parents to sell their home just to buy you a motorcycle?"
"I have no father or mother," I replied quietly.
"Khosrow still hasn't even paid his night school tuition," she added sadly.
Khosrow flew into a rage, threw his fork and spoon onto the tablecloth, and stormed off to his room. His mother, her voice trembling with innocence, called out to him, "Is it fair, Khosrow? Is it fair that we should sell everything we own just for a motorcycle?"
Realizing his mother was airing his grievances to me, Khosrow emerged from his room and snapped, "Get up, let's go. My mother has turned this meal into poison." I stood up and we left together.
On the way, overwhelmed by the sight of his mother's suffering, I turned to Khosrow and said, "I'll do it. I'd rather we steal from the shrine than have your parents lose their home." Khosrow beamed with joy, and right then and there, we began plotting how to rob the shrine.
I knew every nook and cranny of the mosque. Because of my small stature, the board of trustees had often sent me through the narrow opening of the silver-barred tomb (*Zarih*) to collect the donations. I told Khosrow, "We have to wait until the offerings inside the shrine reach a sufficient amount."
Khosrow agreed.
The mosque was ancient, surrounded on its back and sides by a sprawling old cemetery where laborers were currently excavating to build a new school. I used to help the trustees with the grim task of gathering human remains. As the workers dug and reached the old graves, I and a few others would collect the bones and skulls, stuffing them into gunny sacks and piling them atop a large communal grave behind the mosque, waiting for them to be transported and reburied elsewhere.
I vividly remember how, among all those dry bones, we once unearthed a perfectly preserved body. After all those

years, there wasn't a single scratch on it—even the shroud was intact. People whispered that he must have been a saintly man to remain so untouched by decay.
Behind the mosque was my secret hideout. We decided that once we stole the money from the shrine, we would stash it there until the dust settled and the initial outcry died down. Only then would I hand the cash over to Khosrow.
To ensure our success, I gave Khosrow his instructions: "Your only job is to be the lookout. It takes the neighborhood patrolman about ten minutes to walk from one end of the street to the other and back. We must time it perfectly so he doesn't spot us. If he sees our faces, we're finished."
That night, we moved through the back alleys, most of them shrouded in darkness, until we reached the back of a coffeehouse opposite the "Haji Bathhouse," not far from the mosque. It was crucial that the patrolman didn't spot us during that final hundred-meter stretch. We watched him from the alley; he walked past our hiding spot, heading in the opposite direction. We waited until he was about fifty meters away, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder. Seizing the moment, we bolted from the alley and reached the lane near the mosque. Out of breath, we paused for a second before creeping toward the back of the mosque, aiming for the women’s entrance to slip into the shrine. Suddenly, several stray dogs in the cemetery began barking furiously. The racket caused a neighbor to flick on their lights and peer out the window to investigate.
Panic seized us, and we fled. In our haste, we forgot about the patrolman. To our misfortune, he spotted us and shouted for us to halt. Since he was still at a distance, we chose flight over surrender. He blew his whistle, but we managed to disappear into a side street. Like a defeated army, we retreated to our homes to rethink our plan for the shrine’s money.
After waiting a few days, I decided to take matters into my own hands—to act in broad daylight, just like the caretaker, and without informing Khosrow. Local shopkeepers often took a nap in the mosque after the noon prayer; between 2:00 and 4:00 PM, the place was usually deserted. I arrived

at 1:00 PM, said my prayers, and lay down on the floor, pretending to rest while waiting for the caretaker to leave. By 2:30 PM, the caretaker locked the shrine doors and exited the mosque. I looked around; only one man was left, buried in a deep, heavy sleep. His loud snoring echoed through the silent hall.

I stood up, unhooked the heavy chain from the shrine's door, and slipped inside. I quickly pulled the door shut behind me, moved toward the small opening of the silver-barred tomb, and with one swift motion, I was inside the *Zarih*.

I was frantically gathering the banknotes when the shrine door swung open. The caretaker stood there, staring at me in utter disbelief. For a moment, he was paralyzed by shock, but then he erupted: "Thief! Thief! Catch the thief!"

In his panic, he made a critical mistake. If he had simply used his bulky frame to block the small exit of the tomb before shouting, he would have easily trapped me. But his fear got the better of him. Realizing his error, he slammed the main shrine door shut to prevent my escape and lunged at me, pinning me in a tight bear hug. He kept screaming, "Thief! Thief!" Sensing the situation was turning south, I began shouting right back at him: "Thief! Thief!"

As we struggled, we both crashed to the floor. He had a death grip on one of my legs while I kicked frantically with the other to break free. Several local shopkeepers rushed into the mosque, pleading for him to let me go and settle the commotion quietly. "Don't cause a scene," they urged. But the caretaker was adamant: "Call the police! He was stealing from the shrine!"

I shouted back, "He's lying! This man was the one stealing!"

The police arrived and took us to the station at **Saighalan Square**, where the detective branch was located. They questioned the caretaker first and then told him, "You may go; we will contact you." Then, a detective turned to me. "What is this about? Why were you trying to rob the shrine?"

With a pocket full of the shrine's cash, I looked him in the eye and said, "He's lying. He, his father, and his aunt have been robbing that shrine for years. Now that I've caught on,

he’s trying to frame me so he can keep stealing in peace. He’s mistaken if he thinks I’ll let him get away with it."
The detective sighed. "You’re young. If we open a criminal file for theft now, you'll be ruined for life. I’ll let you go this time, but stay away from that mosque unless there’s a public ceremony. If I see you here again, I won't be so lenient." I kept up the act until the end, insisting, "You should be watching *them* so they don't rob the place!" Then, I walked out of the station. Miraculously, they never searched my pockets.
I headed straight to our usual coffeehouse to find Khosrow and give him the money for his tuition. The owner—who was related to the shrine’s caretaker through marriage to two of the man’s maternal aunts—asked me, "What was that fight about?"
"You know well enough," I replied. "He just wanted to keep me away from the mosque." I had a few teas until Khosrow finally appeared. He looked dejected. "What did you do?" he asked anxiously.
"Come outside," I said. "I'll tell you everything."
As we walked, he pressed me: "So, what happened today? Were you trying to keep the haul for yourself?"
"I didn't want you involved," I explained. "I was afraid we’d get caught. I couldn't bear the thought of shaming your mother or seeing you ruined. That’s why I decided to get the money alone—to pay your fees so your parents wouldn't have to sell their home for that motorcycle." I handed him the cash. He was overjoyed. "Count it," I said. "Is it enough?"
Without counting, he replied, "It's more than enough. Thank you."
Khosrow vanished with the money for several days. I even went to his house, but his mother said she hadn't seen him either. When he finally resurfaced, I asked where he'd been.
"I paid my tuition and started attending classes," he claimed.
"Does your mother know?"
"Yeah, I was just staying at some friends' houses."
Time passed, and we spent most nights smoking hashish with his circle. Khosrow had managed to hook almost every young regular at that coffeehouse. Mohammad-Ali was the

worst of them—a total moocher who would devour anything for free but never had a cent to contribute.
Eventually, Khosrow claimed again that he needed money for his "tuition," or he'd be kicked out. He disappeared once more. When I ran into Mahmoud, I asked if he had news of Khosrow.
"Sure," Mahmoud said. "We went to *Sheitan-Kooh* in Lahijan last night. We had a blast."
"But doesn't Khosrow have school?" I asked, confused.
"School? He hasn't stepped foot in a classroom for ages."
"But he said he paid his fees weeks ago! I thought that's why he wasn't coming to the coffeehouse—to study."
Mahmoud smirked. "You are so naive. What school? Ever since I've known him, he's been 'struggling with tuition.' He has never paid it, and he never will."
Mahmoud's words hit me like a sledgehammer. *Had it all been a lie?* I thought. Has he been playing us all this time? Doing the same to his own parents, bleeding them dry under the guise of an education?
I sat there, lost in thought, looking at the world around me. I realized that since Khosrow had entered our lives, he had systematically turned the local boys into addicts—even Mohammad-Ali. My heart ached for Mohammad-Ali's father; his entire livelihood was a single fruit cart he pushed to provide for his family.
This realization shook me to my core. Despite my immense affection for Khosrow, I decided it was time to settle the score.
One day at the coffeehouse, I was talking to Gholam's brother—an athlete who loathed the drug culture. He looked me in the eye and said, "If you don't get out of this today, you never will."
Just then, Khosrow walked in. With his usual charm, he greeted everyone and reached out to shake my hand. I ignored him. He just smirked, walked to the back of the room, and began his typical smooth-talking with the others. He kept casting sly glances at me while I struggled internally, trying to figure out how to put an end to this.
One of the boys asked him, "Why is the *Seyed* upset with you?"

"Because he’s a mama's boy," Khosrow mocked, beginning his usual string of insults.
In that moment, my eyes fell on the large bread knife sitting next to the pot of beans. I stood up, gripped the handle, and lunged toward him.
Tears streamed down my face as I grabbed him by the collar. "Get out of here!" I screamed. "Go! You are never to set foot in this coffeehouse again!"
The other boys jumped in, pinning my arms to prevent me from hurting him. Through my sobs, I yelled at him, "Why did you exploit my kindness? Why all the lies? You turned everyone here into an addict! You didn't even spare your own parents! I swear to God, if you come back tomorrow, I’ll kill you!"
Seeing that I was being held back, Khosrow stood up calmly. "You're just a mama's boy," he sneered before heading for the exit. He stopped at the door and shouted back, "I'll be here tomorrow to see what the hell you're going to do about it!"
The boys, seeing my blind rage, pleaded with him to just leave. Once he was gone, they pried the knife from my hands and put it back. I don't know what would have happened if Khosrow had stayed and pushed me further that day.
After Khosrow left, I felt a slight sense of calm. Gholam’s brother—the literature teacher who was also deeply troubled by his own brother’s opium addiction—turned to me and said: "You cannot change him; you can only change yourself. Whether he chooses to come to this coffeehouse or not is no longer your concern."
I didn’t see Khosrow for several days until someone whispered to me, "He still comes here, but only late at night, after you’ve already headed home."
Then came the sting of betrayal. Mohammad-Ali, one of my oldest friends—the one I had always supported financially and looked after—saw that my bridge with Khosrow was burnt. Without a word to me, he chose the hashish over our friendship and continued his bond with Khosrow in secret.
I endured the grueling days of withdrawal and the hollow ache of loneliness. I stayed away from them, refusing to

step back into that circle. I bore the pain of being alone rather than being with them... until something changed.

The Turning Point: A Hand from the Quicksand

One day, homeless, alone, and rejected by everyone, I sat on the mosque steps, ruminating on the miserable life I was trapped in. I was so submerged in my troubles that I felt detached from the world. Every moment felt darker than the last, and any glimmer of hope had vanished. I was like someone caught in quicksand—the more I struggled, the deeper I sank, while everyone stood around simply watching me disappear, indifferent to my fate.

I was so lost in my despair that I didn't even notice a car pull over or the driver staring at me. The sound of the horn jolted me back to reality. I looked up and saw my cousin gazing at me from inside the car. I couldn't believe it. He had rolled down the window and was studying my face with an intensity that suggested he knew: if he didn't reach out now, tomorrow would be too late.

He looked at me with his ever-present smile and beckoned me over. With a heavy sense of hopelessness, I stood up from the steps and walked toward him. I offered a greeting.

"What’s the matter, cousin?" he asked. "Has your nonexistent ship finally sunk?"

"No, it’s nothing," I replied.

"What do you mean, 'it's nothing'?" he countered. "I’ve been sitting here for a while watching you. It was as if you weren't even in this world, but drifting through another one entirely!"

He reached out his hand to shake mine. "Now, tell me, what happened?"

"I don't even know myself," I said with indifference.
"What are you doing with your life?" he asked.
"Nothing. What is there for me to do?"
"I heard you're not in school either," he noted.
"No school will take me, and I don't have the heart for studying anyway."
"Would you like to work?" he asked.
"Yes," I replied.
"Then get in the car."
I sat in the front seat. He started the engine and moved the car to a better parking spot nearby. He looked at me for a few moments and said, "Cousin, do you promise to protect my reputation?"
"I promise," I said.
He extended his hand again. "A gentleman's word?"
I squeezed his hand. "A gentleman's word."
The truth was, in the state I was in, I would have given my word to the Angel of Death himself if he had asked. He looked at me again and smiled. Then, he reached into his pocket and handed me his business card. "I'm on leave right now," he said, "but I head back to work in three days. Can you come to the address on this card on Saturday?"
"Yes," I said.
"Then take care of yourself until Saturday. Try to bring a quilt, a mattress, and some warm clothes with you.
After he said goodbye and drove away, I was in disbelief. How was it possible that in my deepest despair, just as I had reached the end of the line and was about to make a fateful decision, someone I barely saw once a year would suddenly appear as my guardian angel? It might be hard to believe, but for the first time, I felt the ground firm beneath my feet. I had found a lifeline, a way to pull myself out of the quicksand.
My miseries were forgotten; I felt as though I had sprouted wings. I had entered a new world. Restless and sleepless, I counted down the days until Saturday to begin my new life. I told no one of my plans, for there was no one left to care. I only mentioned to Mohammad-Ali that I would be traveling for a while. For the first time, I packed a quilt, a mattress, and some warm clothes into a bag and headed toward Tehran to report to the **Abisco Company**.

From Tehran, I boarded a train toward **Firuzkuh**. It was my first time traveling by rail; I was a mix of pure thrill and nervous excitement. I kept wondering: *What will my workplace look like?* As the train stopped at every station, I counted them one by one. Only a few stops remained. Despite my exhaustion, I didn't dare sleep, terrified I would miss my destination.

With only two stations left, I suddenly jolted awake to find the train slowing down. I turned to the passenger next to me, who had also just woken up, and asked, "How many stops left until Firuzkuh?"

"We just pulled out of Firuzkuh station," he replied.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" I gasped.

"I fell asleep too," he muttered.

Dazed and groggy, I asked, "What do I do now?"

"Get off at the next stop and take the next train back," he suggested. In my ignorance, I got off at the next station with all my luggage. I had no idea that was the last train of the night and that no other would pass until morning.

It seemed I was the only soul who had disembarked. I looked around, but there wasn't a glimmer of light to be seen. Only a small wooden sign stood there, displaying the return schedule. I had no choice but to wait seven long, lonely hours for the sun to rise.

Exhausted, hungry, and shivering in the piercing cold, my eyes caught sight of a bridge. I stumbled toward it and curled up right there under the span, wrapped in the only quilt I had. Hours later, the rumble of the train tracks jolted me awake. I scrambled to gather my things and rushed to the station just as the train pulled in. I boarded again, but this time, I didn't even dare to sit down.

Luck was on my side; the conductor never showed up, sparing me from buying another ticket. By 6:00 AM, the train reached the next station. I asked the station master for directions to the company and headed straight there.

As I entered the workshop grounds, I greeted a driver who was just parking his truck and followed him to the mess hall. A group of workers was having breakfast, and they welcomed me warmly. One young man with a Mashhadi accent offered, "If you’d like, you can share my room." I

accepted, and he helped me carry my belongings to his quarters.
Back in the mess hall, he asked, "Haven't had breakfast?"
"No," I replied, "I didn't even have dinner last night."
"When did you set out?" he asked. I recounted the story of missing my stop and sleeping under the bridge. He looked at me in disbelief. "I'm telling the truth," I insisted.
"There are wolves and stray dogs all over those parts," he said, shaken. "You're lucky they didn't catch sight of you."
About an hour later, the workshop supervisor arrived to show me my duties. We walked over to an electrical generator tucked in a corner near the workers' quarters.
"This generator powers the entire area and the workshop," he explained. "From today, you are responsible for its maintenance. If it breaks down, it takes days for an engineer to come from Tehran to fix it."
He trained me on the maintenance routines and how to monitor the load. "When darkness falls and the lights go on," he instructed, "you must adjust the generator to match the power consumption.
After explaining my primary duties, the supervisor introduced me to the various sections of the workshop. I visited the warehouse and met the storekeeper, who told me to come to him whenever I needed electrical supplies or wanted to place an order. Then, I headed to the repair shop and met two Armenian mechanics; they were incredibly kind and full of jokes. Finally, we reached the heavy machinery lot—a sea of loaders, bulldozers, heavy-duty trucks, and trailers.
"Sometimes these machines have battery issues," the supervisor explained. "We have a charging station here. The drivers will bring their batteries to you, and you'll be responsible for charging them and monitoring the battery acid levels."
After these introductions, I returned to the room of my Mashhadi roommate, who was busy working in the cafeteria. A few drivers were gathered there. They approached me and said, "We often work in shifts and need to pass the truck keys to the next driver. We used to leave the ignition keys with the person in charge of the generator. We'd like you to take on that responsibility as well."

I accepted. I had lunch as my roommate's guest, and we planned to head to a nearby village on Friday, a few kilometers away, to stock up on a week’s worth of supplies. As the days and weeks turned into months, everything progressed smoothly. I didn't feel like a stranger at all; I had found a true friend and had finally been given the chance to start my life over and work on myself.

The Mirror of Conscience: Redefining Integrity

I remember finding a hundred-Rial note lying on the ground one day. First, I scanned my surroundings to ensure no one was watching, then I stepped on it and bent down as if to tie my shoelaces—but in reality, I snatched the bill from under my foot. I walked back to my room with practiced indifference and tucked the money under the straw mat. Just as I was leaving the room, my eyes caught my reflection in the large mirror by the door. I felt a sudden, sharp sting of shame.

My mind raced back to the days when everyone had cast me aside, and only my dear cousin had reached out to save me. I stared at my reflection and whispered, "Aren’t you ashamed? Didn’t you promise to protect your cousin’s reputation? Why did you take this money and hide it?"

I wrestled with myself. *This money doesn't belong to anyone; I just found it,* I argued. But the answer came back immediately: It doesn't matter. It isn't yours, and you shouldn't have taken it. To justify my actions, I told myself, If I hadn't *picked it up, someone else would have, or a car might have crushed it into the dirt.*

For several minutes, a battle raged between my old habits and my conscience. Finally, my conscience won. But I was torn: should I put it back where I found it and hope the owner returned, or take it to the company cafeteria to search for the rightful owner?

Ultimately, I decided to hand the money over to my friend who ran the cafeteria so he could post a notice. The moment I surrendered that bill, I felt as though I had reclaimed my lost humanity.
I began to feel a newfound sense of self-respect. Soon, the owner was found, and news of the act reached the main office. Since a hundred Rials was a significant sum, my cousin—who worked there as an accountant—was overjoyed and asked the company manager to commend me.
The manager gave me a raise. Later, when an audit revealed that some cash and spare parts were missing from the warehouse, suspicion fell on everyone except me. My integrity had become my shield.
My daily routine was simple: I would start the generator in the morning and then have little to do during the day. We were isolated; the road construction site was tucked deep within the mountains and forests, with the nearest village eight kilometers away. Driven by a desire to learn, I would put on my coveralls and head to the mechanical shop to assist the two Armenian mechanics. They were happy for the help, and I began to master the trade. This shared work forged a deep bond of friendship between us.

The Joyride and the Breakdown: A Race Against Time

On Thursday, my roommate told me he wanted to head to Tehran after work and return Friday afternoon. He suggested I join him. I wanted to go, but I was worried; there was no one to look after the generator. "Leave it to so-and-so," he insisted. "We'll be back before you know it." I spoke to the person he suggested, and he agreed to cover for me.
"Do you have a car?" I asked my friend.
"No," he said, "we'll just stand by the road and flag down whatever comes along."

We stood by the roadside as several cars sped past. Drivers were wary of picking up strangers in such a remote area. Weary of waiting, I told my friend, "Hide yourself so the driver can't see you. I have long hair; I'll stand in a way that makes them think I'm a woman from a distance. Once they pull over, you jump out." He agreed.

Soon, a Jeep appeared in the distance. I positioned myself so only my long hair was visible. The Jeep screeched to a halt, and to my shock, the driver called me by name. When I turned around, I saw the two Armenian mechanics from the workshop; they were also heading to Tehran.

We hitched a ride with them. They mentioned they'd be returning Friday night and offered us a lift back, but I declined, thinking Friday night would be too late. We wanted to be back sooner.

After saying our goodbyes, we wandered through the city. We went to Qazvin Square and took a souvenir photo next to a photographer who had a large motorcycle. We had a wonderful time. We spent the night at the home of one of his friends.

Early the next morning, we did some shopping and headed back to the spot where we'd been dropped off, hoping for a ride back to work. After several cars passed us by, one finally stopped.

Halfway there, the car broke down. The driver struggled to fix it but failed. We were stranded in the heart of the mountains and forests until a truck arrived. That driver helped patch up the car but warned our driver not to speed, as it might break down again.

Dusk began to fall as we crawled along at a snail's pace. A journey that should have taken two or three hours stretched into five or six.

Even though I had entrusted the generator to someone else, a gnawing anxiety consumed me. We were still several kilometers away from the site when I began scanning the horizon, desperate for a glimmer of light. But as we pulled into the workshop, we were met with absolute darkness. Panicked, I jumped out and ran toward the generator. I touched its casing; it was cold to the touch, yet the pungent stench of burnt wiring hung heavy in the air. A few workers had lit a fire in a corner of the yard and were huddled

around it. They approached us as I shouted, "What happened? Where is he?"
"We don't know," they replied. "It seems he took off for Tehran and just abandoned the machine."
I was distraught and filled with dread. When morning came, the site supervisor arrived. Seeing the burnt generator and the entire workforce idling, he was livid. We had a heated exchange before he retreated to his office to call the main headquarters, demanding a technician.
Half an hour later, he returned. "The general manager wants to see you," he said coldly. "You need to go to the main office."
"What’s the situation?" I asked. "Is someone coming to fix it?"
"No one can make it for at least ten days," he snapped.
"How am I supposed to get to the office?" A driver who was heading that way gave me a lift.
First, I went to see my cousin, the accountant. The atmosphere was grim. He tried to remain calm when he saw me, but his face betrayed his agitation. "What have you done?" he whispered. "The boss is furious; nothing can placate him. The entire site will be shut down for at least a week, and the losses to the company are massive."
He added, "You have to face him alone. I don't even have the courage to walk in there with you."
With my head bowed in shame, I left his office and walked toward the manager's room. I stood behind the door for a moment, praying for strength. I knocked and entered.
I offered a greeting, but he instantly erupted into a barrage of insults and reprimands. "Greetings? You’ve ruined us!" he shouted. "You’ve even dragged your cousin’s reputation through the dirt!"
I knew I was at fault, and if it weren't for my cousin’s honor, I might have stood my ground and fought back. Instead, I remained silent, absorbing his rage.
"Pack your things and get out," the manager declared. "I don't ever want to see your face here again."
"What about my wages?" I asked quietly.
He let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "The nerve of you! After all this damage, you’re asking for pay? Ten years of your salary

wouldn't even cover a fraction of the losses you've caused."
Without another word, I walked out of the room.
My cousin was waiting to see the outcome. I went to him, offering my deepest apologies. "I hope you can forgive me," I said quietly.
"You haven't just ruined yourself, cousin," he replied with heavy disappointment. "You've discredited me as well."
I stood there, speechless; there were no words left to defend what I had done.
I walked out of the office, utterly lost. In the courtyard, the driver who had brought me was still waiting. "What happened?" he asked.
"Nothing," I said. "I'm just out of a job."
He looked genuinely pained. "Get in. I'll drive you back to the workshop."
"No, you have work to do," I countered.
"Until that generator is fixed, I have nothing to do," he insisted. "Now, get in. I'm taking you back."
We drove back to the site. Everyone was waiting for the news. "I've been fired," I told them.
A wave of sadness hit the group. I went to my room, packed some of my belongings, gave a few things to my roommate, and then sat in the corner, hugging my knees.
"You blew it, Mansour," I whispered to myself. "You really blew it. You've burned the last bridge."
This was my first real job, and to be fired in such disgrace was a crushing blow. I sat in thought for a while before deciding to step out.
My friend stopped me at the door. "I know you're upset with me," he said.
"It's not your fault," I replied.
"But I was the one who suggested going to Tehran," he lamented.
"The car breaking down wasn't your doing," I said. We had grown very close in those weeks.
As I tried to push past him, he grabbed my arm. "Where are you going? It's raining out there."
"I want to walk in the rain," I said. "I need to clear my head."
"I'm coming with you."
"I want to be alone."

"So, you *are* angry with me," he concluded.
"No, of course not. Fine, come along then."
He grabbed an umbrella and a flashlight, and we stepped out into the wet night. As we walked toward the generator, he muttered, "Forget about it. That damn machine is the reason you lost your job and have to leave us."
"No," I insisted. "I want to see what happened."
"What is there to see? It's burnt to a crisp."
I approached the machine, inspecting it closely and sniffing the air. I noticed that the stench of burnt insulation was much stronger behind the starter box than from the engine itself.
"Can you get my toolbox?" I asked.
"Leave it," he sighed. "It's useless."
I started to go for it myself, but he stopped me. "Fine, I'll get it."
I took the flashlight, and he disappeared into the dark to fetch the tools.
I unscrewed the engine casing using a two-Rial coin as a makeshift screwdriver and peered inside with the flashlight. I noticed that the insulated wires running from the alternator to the back of the starter box had fused together, but the main winding appeared unscathed.
When my friend returned, I asked, "Do you have a large tarpaulin?"
"No," he said, "but there should be one in the warehouse."
We headed to the warehouse, grabbed a large tarp, some colored wiring, and specialized clamps, and rushed back to the generator. Under the makeshift shelter, I began cutting away the charred wires one by one, replacing them with new ones using the clamps. My friend helped me prime the fuel tank and refill the radiator. The entire ordeal took about two and a half hours.
As the first light of dawn began to break, I placed my trust in God, praying He wouldn't let me down. With trembling fingers, I pressed the starter button. I tried several times, but the machine remained stubbornly silent.
The sound of the struggling starter woke my Armenian friend, the mechanic. He came over, rubbing his eyes in disbelief. "What are you two doing? This machine is burnt out!"

"Only the external wiring was scorched," I explained. "I've replaced it all, but it won't kick over."
"Then it must be the carburetor," he said, stepping in.
He dismantled the carburetor, cleaned it thoroughly, and reinstalled it. This time, he called upon Jesus Christ for help, while I turned to the Creator of the Universe, my only true ally.
We hit the starter again. Just as despair was about to set in, the starter cut out, and with a thunderous roar and a final puff of acrid smoke, the engine surged to life.
My friend let out a scream of pure joy and threw his arms around me. The other workers came spilling out of their rooms; when they saw our celebration, they joined in, dancing and cheering in the early morning light. At that moment, I felt like the world was at my feet; I was bursting with a happiness I had never known.
For the first time in my life, I truly believed in myself. I was proud of what I could do. But more than anything, I was moved by the joy of my friends. I felt I was no longer alone. Their happiness stemmed from the hope that this miracle would cancel my dismissal and that I wouldn't have to leave them. By four or five in the morning, they went to prepare a grand breakfast to celebrate our victory.
We were having breakfast when a friend rushed in. "The site supervisor just arrived," he said, breathless. "He saw the lights on and the machines running. He was stunned! He asked, 'Did the engineer from Tehran arrive already and fix the generator?'"
I replied, "No, *our* engineer fixed it."
Just then, the supervisor walked in. Despite the friction between us, he saw our joy and offered his congratulations. "You've covered years of progress in a single day," he admitted. "I'm happy for your success, but even happier that you'll be staying on with us." He asked me to see him in his office after breakfast.
At 6:00 AM, as the crews headed to work, I went to his office. He smiled and said, "Get ready. We're going to the main office together. I'm going to personally ask the general manager to reinstate you."
I thanked him but shook my head. "I appreciate it, but I no longer wish to work for this company. I've decided to move

on to a different firm."
He was taken aback at first, but then he softened. "If you don't want to stay with us, there's a major road construction company in the region. A close friend of mine is the site manager there. If you go and give him my name, I guarantee they'll hire you. I'll even call him myself."
I thanked him sincerely and told him I was going to pack my bags.
I returned to my room to find my roommate preparing to head into town. He asked me to join him. "I have to go to the main office first to say goodbye to my cousin," I said. "Go ahead; I'll meet you in town later." We set a time and place to reunite.
I began packing, leaving a few of my belongings behind for my friend as a parting gift. After saying my final goodbyes to the crew, I hitched a ride with one of the truck drivers to the headquarters. When I stepped into the accounting office, my cousin—who had clearly heard the story of the "miracle" repair—stood up the moment he saw me. He walked toward me with open arms, pulled me into a tight embrace, and whispered in my ear: "Cousin, you've made me proud. Bravo!
Despite everything that had transpired, I offered him my apologies and said, "I've come to say goodbye."
"Goodbye? What are you talking about?" he replied, surprised. "The manager is thrilled with the news. Come, let's go to his office; he wants to see you."
I thanked him again but stood my ground. "From now on, I want to stand on my own two feet."
Hearing this brought a smile to his face. "I have no doubt you will stand firmer than ever," he said warmly. "And remember, whenever you need my help, I am at your service."
As I turned to leave, he insisted, "Before you go, let's see the manager together. I want to tell him how proud I am of my cousin."
I agreed, and we entered the manager's office. He rose from his desk, offering his congratulations to both of us for what I had achieved. He then asked me to stay and continue my work.
"Since we've already had such a confrontation," I replied

respectfully, "it would be difficult for me to remain."
"I wish you the best of luck, then," he said.
He wrote me a glowing letter of recommendation, signed it, and handed it to me. "With this," he noted, "you can find work in any company. And for repairing the generator, I'm granting you a one-month bonus so you can leave us with a happy heart. Now, go to accounting to collect your bonus and your back pay."
I thanked him, said my final goodbye to my cousin, and collected my earnings. I went to our meeting spot to say goodbye to my friend, but no matter how long I waited, he never showed up. I had to leave without seeing him, though he remained in my thoughts as my truest friend.
I returned to Rasht for a week to rest. It felt as though no one was waiting for me. I first visited my old haunt, the coffeehouse. It was exactly as I had left it—the same faces, the same atmosphere, as if time had stood still. I had a tea and then went to see Mohammad-Ali's father. He was delighted to see me. "Mohammad-Ali was just here," he said. "He went home to bring me some food; he'll be back any minute."
After talking with his father for a while, I said, "I'm going to the mosque; I'll be right back."
I entered the shrine of **Aqa Seyed Abbas** and **Seyed Esmael**. With a deep sense of reverence, I whispered, "I've come to repay my debt to you."
I dropped an amount of money into the shrine that I believed covered what I had taken before. As I stepped back out into the courtyard, I saw Mohammad-Ali waiting for me. He beamed with joy at the sight of me.
Mohammad-Ali had two sisters and a brother. His father, despite having one leg shorter than the other, worked tirelessly, selling fruit from a four-wheeled cart to provide for them. His mother was one of those saintly souls who, despite their poverty, created the best for her children with the meagerest of means. She knew how much I loved **Sirabij** (a local Gilani dish)...

That was why she always kept fried garlic ready in the refrigerator and wouldn't let anyone touch it. It was as if she knew I was helping her husband. Whenever I used the excuse of buying fruit to pick up one of his oranges and peel it, I would give half to him and slip some extra money into his cash box. He knew the orange was merely a pretext for my support.
After a week of rest, I headed back to Firuzkuh to meet the site manager of the new firm and see if they needed an electrician. I arrived at the new road construction site and asked for Mr. Yavari, the manager. The attendant told me, "Mr. Yavari is out meeting someone but will be back shortly." He poured me a tea and said, "Drink this; let the road-weariness leave your body."
I was finishing my tea when Mr. Yavari arrived. In a warm Azeri accent, he asked, "Are you looking for me?"
"Your friend at the other company suggested I come to see you about work," I replied.
"Yes, he told me your story," he said with a nod. "Come, have a seat."
We sat down, and he spoke to me with genuine sincerity. "You are like a son to me," he said. "I want you to look at me as a father or an older brother. If you have any trouble or need anything, come straight to me."
He then took me on a tour of the site, showing me the workshops and the living quarters for the workers and staff. It was a massive operation; during lunch, the cafeteria was packed to capacity. He led me to a workshop, introduced me to the crew, and announced, "Mansour is your new colleague."

I also got to know the supervisor there—a good man. Whenever I asked him, "Can I fix this in such-and-such a way?" he would reply, "We have plenty of tools here. Don't ask me; do what you think is right so you can learn for yourself. If I always tell you how to do it, you'll get into the habit of asking instead of pushing yourself to master the trade."
It was an incredible environment, and I made good friends there. For the first time, I didn't have a single conflict with anyone.

The Snowy Peak and the Pack of Wolves: A Deadly Wager

Towering mountains surrounded our workshop, their highest peaks capped with perpetual snow. One Friday, during our day off, I made a bet with two of my roommates: the first to bring back snow from the summit would be the winner. The others had even placed separate bets on each of us. Without a single piece of climbing gear, we prepared ourselves. Each of us grabbed a plastic bag to hold the snow, and under the watchful eyes of our self-appointed judges, we set off toward the mountain.
After an hour of climbing, the first friend surrendered. "I'm out," he admitted. "I can't go any higher." He said his goodbyes and headed back down. We pushed on for another thirty minutes. I noticed the second friend was gasping for air. He said he couldn't take another step and pleaded with me to turn back with him.
"You were the one talking big down there about being a mountaineer," I mocked. "What happened?"
"I was wrong," he confessed. "This is my first time actually climbing. From down there, it looked so easy, but now that we're here, it feels like the trail never ends."
He begged me to return, but I was stubborn. "If you want to go back, go. I'm continuing."
"If it’s about the money," he said, "I concede. You win; take it all."
"The deal was that whoever brings the snow back wins," I insisted. He left me reluctantly.

I kept climbing—I don't know for how long—until I finally reached the summit. I stuffed my bag with snow, packing it tight so it wouldn't melt before I reached the bottom. After a brief rest, I scouted for a way down and chose a path between two peaks. As dusk began to fall, the chilling sound of barking echoed through the mountains. I looked around and saw several stray dogs—looking more like wild wolves—charging toward me with terrifying speed and fury.

I had heard that if a dog attacks, kneeling on one knee might scare them off, but I was paralyzed with fear. I knew that if I sat down and they lunged, I would be torn to shreds. To make matters worse, I wasn't wearing proper boots; I was in the high-heeled shoes that were fashionable back then, making it impossible to run.

The only thing that caught my eye in that desperate moment was a single tree. I ran toward it with every ounce of strength I had. One of my shoe heels snapped off, but I scrambled limping to the trunk and climbed it like a flash of lightning. There was barely any distance left between me and the snapping jaws. From my perch, I watched as the dogs circled the base, their barks sounding like a grim ultimatum—as if daring me to step back down.

I clung to the branches, my heart hammering. *What on earth will I do if they figure out how to climb up?* I thought. If that tree hadn't been there, I would have certainly lost my life. The dogs barked until they grew weary, finally losing hope of reaching me. They went quiet and settled onto the ground.

After a while, one of them stood up and slowly retreated toward some caves in the mountainside, and the rest followed. Still, I didn't dare descend. I lost track of how long I stayed up there, but darkness had fully set in. From my high vantage point, I could see the distant lights of our workshop twinkling. I wondered if I would ever make it back alive.

A few times, I snapped off small branches and tossed them into the shadows to see if the pack would react. Once, I climbed halfway down, but panic seized me again, and I retreated to the top. I considered staying there until dawn, hoping someone might find me, but the fear of falling to my death if I drifted off to sleep kept me awake.

Eventually, an absolute silence swallowed the mountainside. There was no longer any sound from the dogs; perhaps they had fallen asleep or simply lost interest. I broke off a sturdy branch to use as a makeshift club. Then, I pried off the heel of my other shoe to balance my gait and crept slowly down the trunk. I lingered at the base for a few moments, ready to bolt back up if they reappeared. But the night remained still.

I moved stealthily through the mountain crevices where the sound of clear, rushing water masked my footsteps. I finally reached the base of the mountain to find a large group of people waiting for me with lanterns. They were in utter disbelief to see me standing there, safe and sound. Miraculously, throughout the entire ordeal of the chase and the standoff, the plastic bag of snow tied to my belt had remained intact.

I held up the bag of snow, and they were stunned. They kept asking how I had survived the pack of stray dogs. One of my roommates was nearly in tears, saying, "What a terrible mistake we made, betting with you to bring back snow!"

As the day ended, it finally sank in just how lucky I had been not to be torn to shreds. After that, I spent many happy days with my friends. Mr. Yavari, the site manager, looked after me like a father. One day off, I found myself doodling with a pencil on a two-Toman banknote. I was sketching over the Shah's portrait, transforming his eye to look like the iconic eye patch of **Moshe Dayan**.

The next day at the cafeteria, I handed the two-Toman bill to the owner to pay for my meal. He unfolded the note, gave me a long look, and instead of putting it in the cash register, he slipped it into his pocket before handing me my change. I took my food and ate, unsuspecting.
As dusk fell, Mr. Yavari came to our room. He asked my two roommates to leave so he could speak with me in private. Seeing his flushed, agitated face, they glanced at me nervously and stepped out without a word.
Mr. Yavari reached into his pocket, pulled out the two-Toman bill, and shouted with a mix of anger and insults, "What is this?"
"What do you mean?" I replied. "It’s just money."
He stepped closer, his voice trembling. "Look at it closely! You fool, have you lost your mind? Do you have a death wish? You’re lucky the cashier gave this to me. If he’d handed it to anyone else, your head wouldn't be on your shoulders right now!"
"What’s the big deal?" I said. "It was just a drawing!"
He erupted again, but after a moment, he calmed down slightly. "I feel sorry for you," he muttered. "What do you even know about politics to do something so reckless?"
"It wasn't my doing," I lied, trying to deflect.
He grew even more furious. "I could turn you over to the authorities right now, but I’m going to give you a chance: pack your bags immediately, settle your account at my office, and get out of here."
I didn't back down. "The banknote isn't mine, but if that's what you want, I’ll pack up and leave."
I did exactly that. I went to his office and collected my wages. He offered some parting advice: "You are like a son to me, and I hate to lose you. But if you stay, the restaurant owner will cause trouble for both you and the firm. That's why you must go."
"I have no grievances against you," I said. "You're only doing your duty."
As I was leaving, he stopped me. "You're walking away so casually, but I can't just let you go like this. I'll give you one more shot."

"What kind of shot?" I asked.
"We have another site a few kilometers from here. You can work there if you want."
"Won't that cause trouble for you?"
"As long as you don't sabotage anything, I won't be in trouble," he replied.
"Fine," I agreed.
He took me there himself, introduced me to the site manager, and told him to look after me. I worked there for nearly two months until I called my eldest sister. She told me that next week, a suitor from Ahvaz was coming for our third sister, Esmat. I took a week’s leave to attend the proposal ceremony.
I returned to Rasht, and the suitor arrived as planned. However, my eldest brother set conditions that the suitor found unacceptable, and he headed back to Ahvaz. My sister told me, "She can’t stay and work in Ahvaz after this; seeing him every day would be too difficult. She’s only going back to Ahvaz to secure a transfer to Tehran."
Finding myself with nothing to do, I decided to settle my military service status and reported to the draft office. This caused me to stay in Rasht a week longer than my approved leave. The Gendarmerie informed me that I would be called up for service in five months.
When I finally returned to the workshop after the two-week delay, the site manager was furious. "You took one week of leave but stayed away for two without any notice," he protested.
"I didn't realize it would take that long," I replied.
"If this is how you're going to work," he snapped, "then I don't want you here."
"Fine," I shot back, "then I won't work."
I finished my time in Firuzkuh and headed back to Tehran. Shortly after, I was hired by a different firm and sent to **Mazandaran** for a new project.

The Fortune Teller of Sari: A Shadow from the Past

My work took me across Sari, Shahi, and Babol. The project involved constructing pre-fabricated middle and high schools, and I was appointed as the electrical systems supervisor. An Italian firm handled the structural assembly, and I had to coordinate my wiring with their progress.

In Sari, I rented a room by the month in a local guesthouse. I planned to finish the school there before moving on to Shahi and then Babol. I gradually befriended the guesthouse staff. One employee, who often visited me during his breaks, mentioned that a renowned fortune teller was staying there—a man who counted the wives of colonels and generals among his wealthy clientele.

At that time, smuggled Winston cigarettes were hard to come by. I had managed to buy a carton of American "Double-Stamp" Winstons and had decorated my room with the packs. Meanwhile, fortune tellers in Iran were under heavy scrutiny for exploiting people; newspapers frequently urged the public to report them to the police.

One Friday, during my day off, I saw two young women and an elderly man being led into a nearby room by the guesthouse clerk. My friend, the clerk, whispered that the old man was the famous fortune teller and the girls had come for a reading. He praised the man's accuracy and legendary reputation.

This news embittered me. My own mother had squandered so much money on fortune tellers and sorcerers that it had poisoned our family life. I told the clerk to eavesdrop from the adjacent room to hear what the charlatan was saying. He returned after a few minutes, reporting that the man had told one girl—who was pregnant—that she would divorce her husband but find happiness with a second suitor. To the other, he predicted a proposal in three weeks that would lead to a blissful marriage.

Hearing this filled me with resentment. As the girls left the room beaming with hope, I called out to them loudly, warning them not to be deceived, but they ignored me.

A week later, the clerk asked to buy a carton of Winstons from me. "Do you smoke?" I asked. "No," he replied, "it's for the fortune teller." I didn't sell them, but I lent him a few packs.

A few weeks after that, he brought me some cake. "This is from the girl whose wedding was predicted," he said. "She's married, and this is her wedding favor." He also mentioned that the pregnant girl had indeed fought with her husband and was now living with her father until the baby arrived.

I was torn by the news—happy for the one who had found a husband, yet troubled that another's marriage had crumbled because of a fortune teller's words. Despite my skepticism, his business flourished; luxury cars constantly arrived to whisk him away to wealthy clients. One day, the guesthouse clerk returned, explaining that the fortune teller couldn't procure more Winstons and wanted to pay me for the packs I had lent him. "I don't want the money," I said. "Tell him to come and read my fortune instead."

He agreed and came to my room on Friday. I offered a greeting, but he acknowledged me only with a silent nod. He spread a checkered cloth on the floor, etched with letters and numbers in every square. Placing his finger on the symbols, he asked me to read them aloud and write them down. He pulled a small frame from his pocket and began working with a set of prayer beads. Interestingly, he listened to my words but remained silent for a long time. Finally, his first words were: "You have no faith in me."

I challenged him about my family. With unsettling precision, he correctly stated the number of my sisters, their locations, and their current situations. Everything he said about my brothers was also accurate. When I asked why he said nothing of my parents, he shook the beads slightly and said, "Your father was a good man; he is buried in Qom, and your mother is there now, visiting his grave."

"That can't be right," I countered in surprise. "My mother is terrified of cemeteries; she didn't even attend the funeral."

"This is what I see," he insisted calmly.

He then turned to my brothers. "You will have a fierce dispute with your brother over your father's inheritance."

I laughed. "My father died years ago, and we haven't even

touched the estate because we don't need to."
"This is what I see," he repeated.
Though I didn't trust him, his accuracy regarding my family’s past was baffling. The idea of my mother in Qom or a legal battle with my brother seemed impossible.
"Tell me of my future," I demanded.
"You will go to the military," he said, "and afterward, you will obtain a 'small booklet' that will change your entire life."
"What kind of booklet could be that important?" I asked.
The clerk chimed in, "He probably means a heavy-duty driver's license; he's always dreamed of one."
I laughed. "Plenty of people have those."
The fortune teller looked me in the eye. "You will understand when the time comes."
He continued, predicting that after the rift with my brother, I would embark on a long journey, eventually marry, and have three daughters. He then rolled the dice twice and corrected himself: "Two daughters and a son."
"Why did you roll twice?" I asked, amused.
"To be sure."
"Sure of what?"
"That there will be a significant age gap between your second and third child." He then indicated the exact spacing between their ages.
The fortune teller continued, "You have endured immense hardship in your life, and these struggles will persist. Your hand will bring fortune to everyone except yourself. If you touch others' stones, they will turn into gold; but if you touch your own gold, it will turn back into stone."
He added, "During your long journey, you will meet someone whose name begins with the letter [X]. When you return from that trip, all the doors of happiness and joy will finally swing open for you."
"How long will I live?" I asked.
"I won't answer that," he said. "It will only cause you distress."
I persisted until he finally muttered, "[X] years."
As for my marriage, he predicted... [X].
After he left, the guesthouse clerk asked, "So, what’s your verdict now?"

"Half of what he said is nonsense," I replied, trying to shake off the feeling.
I went straight to the telephone office and called my sister. After the usual greetings, I asked, "Any news of 'The Lady' (Mother)?"
"Mother went to Qom a week ago," my sister said.
"You're joking!" I exclaimed. "Why Qom?"
My sister explained, "She said she'd been dreaming of our father every night for a while. In the dreams, he kept telling her, 'You coward, you left me all alone and walked away.' So, she decided to go to Qom for a month to visit his grave every day and pray for his soul."
Hearing those words, the hair on my arms stood on end. I was suddenly certain that every other word the fortune teller had spoken would eventually come true.

.

The Move to Kolagar-Mahalleh and the Giant Crane

The construction project in Sari hit a snag. The company decided that the materials for the **Shahi** project were more ready, so I was sent there to set up the electrical systems first.
Upon arriving at the Shahi site, I was stunned to find **Mr. Yavari**—my former supervisor from Firuzkuh—serving as the site manager there. He couldn't believe we were working together again. I told him, "I should head into town and find a guesthouse to stay in."
"A guesthouse isn't a good idea," he advised. "There's a nearby village called **Kolagar-Mahalleh**. You should live there."
It sounded like a great plan; I had always admired the simple, sincere nature of village folk. I asked one of the workers if he knew of a suitable room for rent. "So-and-so has a great room," he said. "It's large and newly plastered. He actually works for you here." He brought the man over, who greeted me warmly. "Yes, I have a spacious room and would be happy to rent it to you."

He picked up my suitcase, and with a traditional welcome, we entered the village of Kolagar-Mahalleh. My landlord lived with his second wife, a young daughter from his first marriage, and a small son from his second. Their house had only two rooms: a small one where the family lived, and the large one they rented to me.

After settling in, I returned to the site to discuss the workflow with Mr. Yavari, who lived above the highway police station near the workshop. "I was told the building is ready for me to start the electrical work," I said.

"Yes, everything is in place," he replied. "The prefabricated walls have arrived, and installing them won't take long. However, the Italian engineer responsible for assembling the **crane** hasn't arrived yet. According to the contract, he's due in two weeks. We're just waiting."

Without hesitation, I said, **"If you want, I can assemble the crane myself.**

Mr. Yavari couldn't believe it. "Are you sure?" he asked, skeptical.

"If the blueprints are available, then yes," I replied.

"The blueprints are here," he said.

"And you won't have trouble with the Abisco Company?" I probed.

"I'll take full responsibility," he answered firmly. "We start tomorrow."

The next day, with the help of the workers, we assembled the crane piece by piece. It was fully operational by the time the head of the Italian firm and their official installation engineer arrived at the site. They were stunned to see the crane already in motion. "Did someone arrive from Italy?" they asked Mr. Yavari.

"Our own engineer installed it," Yavari replied, introducing me.

At first, they were furious. "By whose authority did you do this?" they demanded. However, after seeing the quality of the work, they offered me a position in their firm. They wanted to send me to Italy for a training course on crane systems, intending for me to return as their representative in Iran. I accepted.

But then, one day, the Italian engineer got drunk. I was busy wiring an electrical panel with a screwdriver in my

hand when he approached me, pestering me with an indecent request: "You have to find a girl for me!"
Infuriated, I slammed my screwdriver into the ground. Because of its rubber handle, it bounced back and struck him near the eye. A heated confrontation ensued, and from that day on, a bitter grudge formed between us. He continued installing the prefabricated walls while I focused on the site's external wiring.
During this period, Mr. Yavari visited me in the village every evening after work. On his first visit, the entire household stood up out of respect for him. He shook my hand and whispered in my ear, "What a fantastic place! And there’s a beautiful girl here to serve us. Enjoy yourself!"
"I'm not into that kind of thing," I told him.
"I'll teach you," he countered with a smirk. "Just watch and learn.
He turned his attention to the family. After greeting and kissing the father, he moved to the daughter and kissed her twice on the cheeks. Then he walked over to me and smirked, "See? Now you've learned. No need to be shy anymore!"
On Friday, he asked the landlord—who was also his subordinate at the site:
"Can you set up the *Basat* (opium kit) for me?"
"Certainly, Engineer," the man replied.
At eight that night, Mr. Yavari arrived in a hired taxi. "Don't you want a guest?" he called out. Again, the entire household stood out of respect. He kissed everyone and settled into my room. They brought him tea, and then the landlord...
He prepared the brazier and the Vafoor (opium pipe), which he claimed to have borrowed from a friend. Mr. Yavari pulled a bottle of liquor from one pocket and a stash of opium from the other. He poured three glasses—for himself, for me, and for the landlord. But the landlord, being a *Seyed*, declined: "I say my prayers; I don't touch alcohol."
"They all say that at first," Yavari chuckled. "Fine, don't drink!"
Then he prepared the opium and began to smoke. He pressured me: "Have some!"
"I'm not into opium," I said.

"Don't be a buzzkill," he countered. "I traveled all this way just for you."
Caught in a sense of social obligation (*Rudarbaysi*), I found myself smoking alongside him. He stayed awake until dawn in a state of euphoria (*Nash'eh*), but I fell fast asleep, which utterly baffled him.
Gradually, other workers began inviting him for dinner, and in every home he entered, he established the ritual of the pipe and the brazier. However, a few workers who were not into opium or alcohol began inviting me alone. They would share their struggles and secrets with me, and I never hesitated to offer whatever help I could.
It was in that same house that I had my first experience sitting under a traditional **Korsi** (a heated low table).
During this time, the landlord's daughter began to develop feelings for me. She had pleaded with her stepmother to tell her father not to let me smoke opium. Later, whenever she saw me with the pipe, she would sit in a corner and weep silently.
One day, her father said to me, "Sir, this house is only missing a television. I want to buy one, but they won't sell it on installments."
"I'll buy it for you," I offered, "and you can deduct the installments from my rent."
He agreed. We went and bought a **14-inch television**. But how I wish I hadn't! From that day on, neither I nor the house had a moment's peace. Every day, the villagers would swarm into my room to watch TV, staying until the very end of the broadcast. Even when the sign-off logo appeared, they would sit there staring at the static on the snowy screen! The landlord was forced to serve them tea, though some brought their own sugar, tea, or fruit.
Later, the landlord decided to take his wife and young son on a pilgrimage to **Mashhad**. It was arranged that an elderly neighbor lady would sleep beside their daughter at night so she wouldn't be alone and, as they put it, "so the Devil wouldn't come between us." Of course, that old woman "forgot" to show up several times.
When they returned from their trip, the landlord told Mr. Yavari, "While we were away, the locals started rumors that the Engineer had an affair with our daughter." He asked

Mr. Yavari to talk to me about **marrying her**, even saying they were willing to give me whatever I asked for.
Mr. Yavari came to me, his eyes gleaming. "Your luck has turned!" he exclaimed.
"How so?" I asked.
"The landlord wants you as his son-in-law. He’s even offering a large piece of land as part of the dowry."
"She’s a good girl," I replied, "but I haven't served my military time yet. I have to report for duty in a week."
When the daughter heard this, she was heartbroken. As I prepared to leave, she asked for at least one photo to remember me by. I agreed; we took a few group photos and one of just me. That was the only memento of my time left in that village.
It was hard to tear myself away from the villagers, but there was no other choice—duty called. I said my goodbyes and left all my belongings behind.
I headed back to Rasht. First, I went to the home of my only friend, Mohammad-Ali. His mother, seeing me, prepared a feast of **Sir-Ghalieh** (a local garlic stew), and we ate until we were full. I handed out the souvenirs I had brought. That night, I went to my eldest sister’s house and stayed in Rasht for a few days.
After saying goodbye to everyone, Mohammad-Ali and I went to the Gendarmerie. The place was swarming with young men and their families, all boarding various buses. I had no one; there was still no news of my mother. My only companion was Mohammad-Ali—and that was only as long as I was covering his expenses with my money.
I went inside and asked the official with the manifest which bus I should board. He looked at the list and said:
"There’s no room for you or a few others yet. Your turn is in four months."
I had no choice but to look for work again. After a few days with Mohammad-Ali, I saw an ad in the newspaper: a company in Tehran needed several electricians. I set off for the capital and spent the night in my brother's small room in an old house near **Si-Metri Shemiran (Pol-e Choobi)**.
The next day, I went to the company and applied for the job.
The Zahedan Contract: Trading Security for Skill

The working conditions at this firm were grueling, primarily because they demanded a hefty guarantee from every employee. They claimed that most workers sent to the field would quit shortly after arriving, saying, "I can’t do this!" To prevent this, their first condition was a 50,000 Rial guarantee.

The second condition was a trial period in Tehran so the company could verify our competence before deploying us to the main site in **Zahedan**. There were seven of us who initially agreed to these terms. We were scheduled to start the next day at a location called the "Wireless Building" in Tehran. I spent the night at my brother Torab’s place, but arrived slightly late the next morning. We began the work, but I was deeply dissatisfied with the working and living conditions in the capital.

The following day, I went to the main office and stated my terms:

"I won't work in Tehran, and I have no one to provide a guarantee for me. However, I am willing to go to Zahedan without a formal contract and work for one month. If you are satisfied with my performance, then we can sign the papers."

"You must provide the 50,000 Rial guarantee," they insisted. "If no one can vouch for you, you can deposit the cash instead."

"That sounds like you want to keep the worker bound hand and foot," I countered, "forcing them to accept any condition you impose. That isn't an honest approach. I am not a man who breaks his word. My offer stands: I’ll work for a month without a contract, and afterward, we can negotiate the wages."

The company president was intrigued. "We've never tried it this way before," he admitted, "but we'll make an exception for you." He agreed to my proposal but asked me to keep the arrangement secret from the others. I accepted. We were told to gather in front of the office at 6:00 AM on Saturday to depart for Zahedan in a company vehicle.

On Saturday morning, I reported to the office. Six others had arrived. Including the driver—who was also the Zahedan site manager—there were eight of us in total. We piled into a Jeep and set off toward Zahedan. Slowly, the

cool Tehran air faded, replaced by the mounting heat of the desert road. While the others peppered the driver with questions about Zahedan, I remained silent, quietly observing my fellow travelers.

We passed through Qom, Kashan, and Yazd, stopping occasionally for rest and meals. Everyone had brought food from home. After a brief respite, we continued toward Kerman. As we drew closer to the heart of the desert, the nature of the questions changed. The talk turned to the agonizing distance from Tehran and the hardship of being away from family. A few were newlyweds, one had a sick mother, and two were engaged. I was the only one with no ties, the only one with no one waiting for him. I remained withdrawn, lost in my own thoughts.

The driver kept his answers vague and general. Despite the fall of night, the air remained stiflingly hot; we were in the middle of summer. We pulled over at a roadside restaurant for dinner. Those with packed meals started eating, while the rest of us bought something to eat. The moment we stepped out of the Jeep, the others began grilling the locals: "What’s the weather like? How are the living conditions?"

After dinner, we prepared to head back out. But one of the men refused to get back into the Jeep. "I’m going back to Tehran!" he announced. No matter how much we pleaded, he wouldn't budge. Even when they reminded him, "But you gave a 50,000 Rial guarantee!" he simply replied, "To hell with it!" and walked away.

We continued our journey, now seven in total including the driver. The atmosphere inside the Jeep turned heavy. Everyone was thinking the same thing: *Poor soul, there goes fifty thousand Rials.*

One of the guys, who had been putting on a tough, "street-smart" act, boasted, "They’d better not try anything; I’ll rip that money right out of their throats!"

Another countered, "That kid who just left isn't built for this. He’ll never see his money again."

We eventually reached Kerman. One of the group asked the driver, "Pull over, we need to rest for a bit."

The Jeep stopped, and we all climbed out. To our surprise, that same "tough guy" grabbed his bag. "I’m heading back to Tehran, too," he announced.

I tried to reason with him: "You've come all this way. Just finish the trip to Zahedan. Stay one night, and if you don't like it, leave tomorrow."
He wouldn't listen. The poor soul was on the verge of tears; it was clearly his first time away from home. He kept saying he couldn't bear to be away from his fiancée. He eventually hopped on a truck heading back. Now, there were only five of us left, including the driver.
It was only then that I fully understood why the company demanded such high guarantees. Every time they sent a crew to Zahedan, the men would "jump ship" one by one along the road and flee back home.
We arrived in Zahedan around 3:00 AM and checked into a guesthouse. I asked the driver, "I thought our workplace was Zahedan. Why are we staying here?"
"We have work in Zahedan for a few weeks," he explained. "After that, we'll be split between **Iranshahr, Khash, and Zabol**. Each city will take about two or three months."
I accepted this, but I told him, "You'd better tell the others the plan so they know exactly what kind of journey they've signed up for."
Exhausted, we fell asleep, but the sweltering heat woke us early the next morning. The supervisor told us, "You're free today. Go see the city." We wandered through the local bazaar; interestingly, most of the shopkeepers were from Isfahan. We did some light shopping and returned to the guesthouse.
That evening, the supervisor confirmed, "We'll be in Zahedan for about two weeks, then we move to the other cities. For now, this guesthouse is our home, but in those other towns, we have our own living quarters."
One of the guys asked, "So we only have two weeks of work in Zahedan?"
"Yes," the supervisor replied. "After that, we head to **Khash**."
"My contract is only for Zahedan, nowhere else," the man countered. "I'll work here for two weeks, and then I'm heading back to Tehran."
The next day, we were taken to the newly built Radio and Television building in Zahedan. Some of the electrical installations were finished, but much remained. We spent

the next two weeks completing the job. By the end, another one of the men quit and left for Tehran. Now, only four of us remained.
It was decided that two would go to Khash and two to Iranshahr. I was chosen for Khash. I reminded the supervisor, "My agreement with the company was to work for one month before finalizing my wages. Two weeks have passed; I have two weeks left."
He nodded in agreement, and the next day, we set off for Khash. We disembarked at the site of the Khash Radio Station, which was still under construction. The supervisor showed us our quarters and the workspace. I and one other teammate—a well-built guy from Tehran—stayed in Khash, while the other two went on to Iranshahr with the manager. Our staff housing was right there at the station, on the outskirts of town. We worked there for a week, frequently encountering snakes, scorpions, and tarantulas. These creatures utterly terrified my colleague. The daytime heat was so punishing that work was impossible, so we decided to rest during the day and work from dusk onward; the nights felt slightly less treacherous.
A few days passed this way, but my colleague was counting the seconds until he could leave. He had already packed his bags, waiting for the supervisor to return. The moment the manager arrived, he rushed to him: "I can't stay here! Take me back to Zahedan!"
The manager had no choice. He took him to Zahedan, stayed the night, and returned the next day. As soon as he saw me, he pleaded, "For God’s sake, don’t tell me you want to leave too!"
"No," I replied firmly. **"I gave my word, and I stand by it. I have no intention of leaving."**
I had promised to work for the company for exactly one month, and now those thirty days had come to an end. For that reason, I refused to put on my work overalls that morning. I turned to the site supervisor and said:
"My month is up. If you are satisfied with my work and want me to continue, here is my proposed salary. I will wait here for two more days for the company’s response. If they don't agree, I’m heading back to Tehran."

"I'll call the office tomorrow and relay your salary demand," he replied.
The next day, he went into town to make the call. When he returned, I asked, "Well, what happened?"
"The company president wasn't in. I couldn't reach him."
The following day he went again, but again he failed. I said, "Then goodbye. I'm going to pack my bags."
He pleaded with me, "Just stay one more day. Maybe there will be news tomorrow."
"Only because of you, I'll stay one more day," I replied. "But tomorrow, I am definitely leaving."
I stayed that day but did no work. He told me, "Since you're here anyway, you might as well get some work done."
"The thirty days are over," I stated flatly.
The next day I asked again, but he said with a look of annoyance, "No news yet, but just keep working. I'll get the approval eventually."
"You are just stalling for time so the work here gets finished," I countered. "But I'm done. Goodbye."
I went to pack my bags. He pleaded with me, "Just wait a few more hours, I promise everything will be sorted out."
He left and returned about an hour later. "Come with me to my room," he said.
"What's wrong with my room? Why should we go to yours?" I asked, suspicious.
He insisted, taking my arm and leading me there. When he opened the door, he said, "Make yourself at home, go on in."
He shoved me inside and bolted the door behind me. I was stunned. *Is he trying to imprison me?* I wondered.
I looked around the room. A young woman was lying on a mattress, draped in a white sheet, reaching her hand out toward me. I looked at her for a second, then turned my head away in deep embarrassment. I couldn't believe it—the site supervisor had orchestrated such a scheme just to keep me from quitting the job.
The woman pulled back the sheet to make her intentions clear. It was only then that I realized how valuable I was to them—so much so that they were willing to stoop to this. I apologized to her, pounded on the door, and demanded the supervisor let me out.

"What happened? Why the rush?" he asked from behind the door.
"I’m not that kind of man," I snapped. "Open this door, now!"
He unlocked it. As I stepped out, he asked, "Do you even know who she is?"
"A prostitute," I replied coldly.
"No, she’s not just any streetwalker. Her price is incredibly high; the wealthiest men around here chase her, but she refuses them. I had to beg a friend to sneak her in here so the workers wouldn't see, and you’re saying no?"
"Instead of these games," I said, "settle my wages."
"Fine, fine! Whatever you say, I’ll agree to it."
He was practically at my feet, begging me to continue. He explained that if the work stopped, the company would face massive penalties. The other workers had also downed their tools because I wasn't working.
"I have no conditions," I said, "other than signing the contract first. The work here will be finished in a week anyway."
"I know," he sighed. "But the problem is, the electricians in Iranshahr have quit and headed back to Tehran. We only have one month left. If the work in Khash and Iranshahr isn't finished by then, we’ll be heavily fined."
The supervisor pleaded so much that I finally relented.
"Fine," I said, "but first, pay me my wages up to this day. Only then will I continue." He agreed, promising to go to the bank the next morning to withdraw the cash.
I resumed the work with two young local laborers. Eight days later, the electrical installations for the Khash Radio and Television station were complete and ready for handover. After that, we moved on to **Iranshahr**. It was significantly hotter and felt more treacherous than Khash. One of our local workers, a boy of about thirteen or fourteen from the **Chekini tribe**, developed a deep bond with me. Even on Fridays when work was over, he refused to go home, preferring to stay by my side.
"Go visit your family," I would tell him.
"No, I want to be with you," he’d reply. "I want to learn the trade."
"You'll learn during work hours," I argued. "This is your free

time."
"Being with you makes me happy," was his only answer.
He was desperate to take me to his village to introduce me to his kin. With that Baluch boy around, I felt less lonely. Whenever there was a wedding or a celebration in their community, he would invite me. Every time I attended, they welcomed me with such profound respect that I felt truly humbled. Getting to know this Baluch family made me realize how sincere, simple, and oppressed these people were. Their poverty was striking, yet they always had smiles on their lips—joyful and unpretentious.
In the town of Khash, there was only one small clinic, run by a Pakistani doctor. Every morning, long before the doors opened, a weary line of patients would form, hoping for an examination and perhaps a single Aspirin tablet. Despite their hardships, the people of the region held a strange affection for the Shah and especially **Empress Farah Pahlavi**. A legend had been circulated that Farah once visited Zahedan and gave her own necklace to a poor person. Everyone believed it was her only necklace, bought with her own personal savings.
The simple-hearted locals had no idea that these royal gestures were mere populist theater—the same tactics used across other cities. But there, they had neither the awareness nor the means to question; even a whisper of doubt regarding the Royal Family was considered a grave sacrilege.
At that time, the people of Sistan and Baluchistan rarely had access to Iranian radio broadcasts. Instead, they mostly tuned into Arabic stations. My young worker would often set the dial to these frequencies while we worked. That was how I first heard the voices of **Umm Kulthum**, **Abdel Halim Hafez**, and **Farid al-Atrash**. I didn't understand a word they said, but their voices rose from the depths of the soul, as if they understood my own isolation. They spoke the language of my heart.
I was someone who had always been a stranger among my own kin. I used to tell myself: If I die one day, I'll have to climb out of my own coffin, shoulder it myself, and carry it to the graveyard. Yet now, in these unfamiliar voices, I found a strange sense of belonging. The songs of Umm

Kulthum and Abdel Halim would shatter the lump of loneliness in my throat, turning it into tears. But as soon as the radio went silent, a profound stillness would settle in my room—a silence I always feared, for it carried a haunting sorrow.
To escape it, I always sought company. After the music faded, I would rise, wash my face, and tell myself: "You aren't the only lonely one. There are many others like you." Outside my solitude, I tried to cheer others up with jokes and laughter. Seeing joy on their faces gave me the energy to be happy myself.
Once we settled in Iranshahr, I dove back into work. I met several people who were slated to take over the management of the Iranshahr Radio Station after the project’s completion. Among them were an engineer and two electrical technicians. They pleaded with me to teach them practical wiring. "You're technicians," I’d ask, "how can you not know this?"
"We know it on paper," they’d reply, "but not in practice." Their quarters were right next to mine, and we grew close. After work, we spent most of our time together, playing cards and laughing deep into the night.

The Viper’s Watch: A Miraculous Escape in Iranshahr

One day, under the sweltering heat, I went to my room after lunch for a nap, as was our custom. I woke up about an hour later and stepped outside to find my friends gathered near a trench we had dug for the site’s lighting cables. One of the technicians looked at me with a mix of relief and disbelief. "You certainly are a heavy sleeper!" he remarked with a faint smile.
"What’s happened?" I asked, confused.

"We wanted to play cards," he explained, "but there were only three of us. The engineer said he'd go fetch you to make it four. When he opened your door, he froze—there was a viper poised to strike, right above your head! He was too terrified to wake you, fearing any movement would trigger an attack. He hurried back and alerted us. We grabbed shovels, dragged the snake out, and killed it."
I laughed, thinking it was a prank. "You're joking, right?"
"Joking?" they countered. "If you don't believe us, come see for yourself."
We walked over to the cable trench. "Mansour doesn't believe you killed it," one of the guys teased the engineer. The engineer moved some dirt with his shovel and revealed the carcass of a massive snake, its head completely crushed. "You're lucky the engineer came looking for you," they said solemnly. "Otherwise, it would be you, not the snake, buried in this trench right now."
The engineer who had killed the snake was consumed by fear. He firmly believed that once you kill a cobra, others will come to seek revenge. From that day on, we sealed every crack and crevice in our rooms with tape and various materials to keep out snakes, scorpions, and tarantulas. We only dared to step outside in the evenings when the air was cooler and felt safer.
One day, the main power went out. The air conditioners died, and the heat became unbearable. Driven outside by the stifling air, we went for a walk in town. Upon our return, the engineer called us into his room. The moment he flipped the light switch, the power surged back, the AC kicked in, and a horrific grinding noise erupted from the unit.
We rushed behind the AC unit only to find the mangled body of a snake protruding from the machine—bloody and writhing. Half of its body had been crushed by the fan blades, and blood was dripping onto the floor. The engineer turned pale. "Do you see?" he stammered. "Didn't I tell you they would come for me? I'm only lucky the AC turned on, or I'd be a dead man by now."
My Baluch worker later heard from the town pharmacy that they would buy live snakes, scorpions, or tarantulas preserved in alcohol. From then on, buying glass jars of

alcohol and trapping dangerous creatures became a small hobby and a source of extra income for us. But our Engineer Ramezani had reached his breaking point. Terrified by the constant encounters with venom, he eventually resigned and returned to his hometown in Mazandaran. I later heard from his friends that even there, a snake had found its way to him...

Finally, the electrical installation for the Iranshahr Radio Station was complete. One day, **Mr. Javadi**, the deputy to **Mr. Ghotbi** (the then CEO of National Iranian Radio and Television), arrived by helicopter. He was accompanied by a delegation to officially take over the project from our firm. The company president and the site manager began explaining the system's operation. Mr. Javadi posed a highly technical question to the president, who had no answer. He turned to the site manager, who also remained silent. Finally, he looked at me, standing right across from him, and asked, "Do you know the answer?"

I explained the technical details to him in full. When he realized that I was the one who had single-handedly completed the installations in both Khash and Iranshahr, he turned to one of his assistants and said, **"Write a twenty-thousand-Rial bonus for this young man."**

He asked me to accompany them by helicopter to **Khash** so he could personally oversee the handover of that project as well. After the successful completion of the Khash inspection, he wrote me another **twenty-thousand-Rial bonus**.

Finally, he looked at me and asked, "How long has it been since you've seen your family?"

"About two months," I replied.

He wrote a note, signed it, and handed it to me. "From now on," he said, "by presenting this paper, you can fly between Zahedan and Tehran for free whenever you wish."

I thanked him deeply. In that moment, I felt that all the loneliness, the scorching heat, the fears, and even the vipers I had encountered along the way had a purpose. They departed, and I remained in Khash. A few days later, the site manager arrived. "Well," he said, "our work here is done. We must return to Zahedan to settle your wages and discuss your future with the company president."

We returned to Zahedan and settled back into the same guesthouse. Another man was there, waiting to speak with the president. When he learned my name was Mansour, he beamed with joy. Before the president arrived, he asked if we could take a walk together. I agreed.

As we walked, he began to unburden himself. He had taken the contract for the **Chabahar Radio and Television** project from our firm, but his electrician had been drafted into the military, leaving him stranded. The project was half-finished—ironically, right at the stage where the easiest and most profitable work remained.

He pleaded for my help, mentioning that the company intended to take the project away from him and hand it over to me. He promised a much higher salary than the firm—even fifty percent more.

I remained silent for a moment before replying, "I am not a man of betrayal. First, I must fulfill my obligations to the company. Today, I intend to settle my past accounts and take a short leave. If we cannot reach an agreement, perhaps then I will consider working with you."

He muttered with a hint of doubt, "I hope you don't reach an agreement with them, for they are men without honor."

We returned to the guesthouse. When the company president arrived and saw us together, he was taken aback. "Do you two know each other?" he asked, suspicious.

"No," we replied, "we just met here."

I turned to the president and said, "I'd like to take a few days of leave, but first, we should settle my past accounts."

"That's exactly why I'm here," he said.

We went to his room, and he began praising the work I had done. I cut through the flattery: "I've fulfilled my obligations; now it's your turn to settle the payment."

"Your salary request was a bit high," he admitted, "but I've accepted it. You can go to accounting to collect your wages."

"There are also two bonuses from Mr. Javadi," I reminded him. "The arrangement was for the funds to be transferred through the company to me. Please issue the check for those as well."

He laughed—a cold, dismissive sound. "The bonuses belong to the company. We'll calculate a small percentage for you

once you return from leave."
"Mr. Javadi emphasized that those bonuses were personal," I countered.
The president snapped back, "You're mistaken. Those rewards belong to the firm."
"Very well," I said calmly. "I'll ask Mr. Javadi himself for clarification."
His tone turned sharp and defensive. "Don't do that. Just go, and we'll discuss it further when you get back."
As I prepared to leave the room, he added, "Please tell the man from the Chabahar project to come in."
I stepped outside, where my new acquaintance was waiting anxiously. "How did it go?" he whispered.
"They accepted the salary," I told him, "but they want to settle the rest of the matters in Tehran."
He handed me his business card and said, "Be sure to call me once your leave is over."
"I'm waiting to see what the company decides," I replied cautiously.
He entered the president's office. Half an hour later, he emerged. "The president said he's coming to **Chabahar** in two weeks. If the project hasn't progressed by then, he'll take it back." He looked at me intently. "What have you decided?"
"I'm making no promises," I said, "but I doubt I'll reach an agreement with the firm. Everything will be clear by next week."
I said my goodbyes and, for the first time, used my military flight pass to fly from Zahedan to Tehran for free. I went to the company's main office, collected my wages, and headed to **Rasht**. My first stop was to see my friend Mohammad-Ali, and then I went to my eldest sister's house to give her the souvenirs I had brought.
A few days later, I was stunned to hear that my sister in Ahvaz had finally married that same suitor. I felt a deep sting of resentment at being kept in the dark. My eldest sister tried to comfort me: "It was her own wish. She didn't want to involve you or cause you more trouble."
I thought back to the fight that had once cost me my job. I realized then that my sister's secrecy had been born out of protection and love for me.

With a heavy heart, I returned to Tehran to settle my final accounts with the company. I visited my brother, Torab, and asked, "Do you have any news of Mother?"
"Yes," he replied. "I've been renting a room for her for about a month now."
"How is she?" I asked.
"If you want to see her," he said, "I'll give you the address.
I went there the next day. Through the window of the room facing the alley, I caught sight of my mother. She saw me too and opened the door. I went inside. After our greetings, I bought her some snacks and fruit. She was happy, but then she began talking about conspiracies again—about how they were trying to control her. Her condition worsened, so I said a quick goodbye and left.
At the company, I spoke with the boss again, but we couldn't reach an agreement. He said:
'I'm willing to give you only 20% of the bonus, but on the condition that you come to Chabahar with me and secure the project.'
I had lost all trust in him. I said, 'Fine, I'll come tomorrow morning.'
But I had already decided to go alone...
When I reached Chabahar, I took a pickup truck to the Konarak radio and television station. From a distance, I saw my friend working. I called out to him. As soon as he saw me, he dropped his tools in joy, ran toward me, hugged me, and said:
'Welcome! I'm so glad you came alone.'
Then he mentioned that the engineer said he was waiting to come with you. I told him:
'The engineer wants to take the job from you and hand it over to me. I've come on my own to collaborate with you. When he arrives and sees this, he's going to be quite upset.'
His face lit up with joy. We went to his room together. He introduced me to the large workshop where over a hundred people were working. Around the workshop, the company was building a naval base, staff housing, and even a runway for navy aircraft that I could use for free.
The next day, they gave me a large mobile unit equipped with a bed and a bathroom. I decided to live right there. The first thing I did was plow the ground in front of my

room and plant cucumbers, tomatoes, and watermelons—something no one there had done until then. Of course, the watermelons were stolen quickly

Over time, I realized that the workers had split into different groups: the opium users, the gamblers, and those involved in immoral activities. Only one person among them stayed away from all that—a simple, prayerful young man. We became friends, and eventually, he came to live with me.

Because the workshop was in a remote area with no form of entertainment, most workers turned to opium, hashish, and gambling to pass the time. One day, the guard came and told me that two Baluch boys were at the gate asking for me. I went to the guardhouse and saw they were the same boys who had worked with me before in Iranshahr. They came forward, hugged me, and said they were willing to work for me even without pay. I was overjoyed. Once I made sure their families knew where they were, we started working together. The work progressed exceptionally well. One of my friends had a Russian Izh motorcycle and would occasionally lend it to me.

.

One day, I took the bike and headed to Konarak—a small town with just a single street and a few shops, most of which sold smuggled goods. I was busy picking out souvenirs when one of the guys from the workshop spotted me.
'Why did you pay so much?' he said. 'Give it back to me, I'll get it for you cheaper.'
He returned the item, got my money back, and told me to hop on so he could show me a better spot. I asked, 'Ready?'
'Yes,' he replied. I revved the engine and took off, but suddenly a piercing scream cut through the air. His foot had been sucked into the rear wheel. It took several shopkeepers to dismantle the wheel just to get his foot out.
After that day, I never dared to touch a motorcycle again.
Later on, we'd go shopping at night in the company's Land Rover—the one with the guard and the Radio-TV logo on the door. I learned the trick of buying in bulk and retailing the goods back at the workshop; sometimes my own share would end up costing me nothing.
Over time, we were even invited by some to join them in smoking opium. It was dirt cheap and found everywhere. If I asked the guard for some, he'd hand it over without a word—and if I said it wasn't enough, he'd just pile on more.
There was a Gendarmerie outpost nearby. They didn't bother the smugglers; they only went after strangers. All the seized goods were piled up at the station. Once a week, the station chief would come by, pick out the best items for himself, and distribute the rest among his men—all in the name of fulfilling his 'national duty!'
One day, a friend of ours from the Education Corps (Sepahi-ye Danesh) bought some gifts for his family. On his way to leave, the gendarmes seized everything. He protested that he'd bought them legally from the shops in Konarak, but they threatened to arrest him for smuggling. He came back devastated. Our company guard took the Radio-TV vehicle to the station, claimed the guy was one of our employees, and got everything back. Because of that logo, they weren't allowed to search the car.

From then on, we used that same car for all our shopping. I even bought my first color TV there—long before color broadcasting had even started in Iran.
One night, after sunset, my Baluch worker was having dinner when he suddenly let out a piercing scream. We realized a scorpion had stung him; he had accidentally sat right on it. Doubled over in agony, he was clutching himself where the sting had hit. We rushed him to the clinic in Chabahar, but it was closed. Fortunately, the doctor’s house was nearby. We showed him the dead scorpion the boys had killed. The doctor told us that this species' venom was lethal —if an hour passed without treatment, death was certain. Thankfully, he was saved just in time.
The guard once told me that smugglers had camels trained to carry loads to their destination entirely on their own. Since the camels knew the way, the gendarmes could never trace the owners. He told a story of a camel attacked by a snake; the animal bolted for miles, its cargo scattering everywhere, until finally, from sheer terror and exhaustion, it bloated and literally burst!
He warned me that outside the workshop, there were snakes and scorpions, but inside, there were even more dangerous 'tarantulas': bad company, drugs, alcohol, gambling, and behaviors I can't even bring myself to mention. Some men, who had been away from their wives for too long, even committed unspeakable acts of cruelty against animals. My friend and I made a pact: we would stay solitary, but we would stay decent.
For the first time there, I started a small library. I asked anyone going on leave to bring back books—works by **Sadegh Hedayat**, **Aziz Nesin**, and others. I even posted a notice in the canteen asking for book donations. Slowly, the library took shape, and our room became a sanctuary for readers.
Two weeks later, the company head arrived to take over the Chabahar project. He told my boss that because the work was behind schedule, he had to hand over the project. But my boss replied, 'The work is moving exactly according to plan.'
Surprised, the head asked how the delay had been recovered. My boss smiled and said, 'I stole Mansour!'

When the head saw me, he remarked, 'So, you were off on a wild goose chase?'
'Yes,' I replied, 'but now the project will be delivered ahead of schedule.'
'You promised we would come here together,' he said.
I looked him in the eye: 'You can't trust someone who embezzles others' money. You kept my forty thousand tomans and intended to do the same to this gentleman. I didn't let that happen.'
Defeated, he returned to Tehran.
I finished the Chabahar project in 45 days, earning about 47,000 tomans. At the time, my brother, a civil engineering technician, earned less than 2,000 tomans a month, and my sister, a teacher, earned even less.
I had only one month left before being drafted into military service. I decided to spend this final month...
I decided to take a rest.
I set off from Chabahar and headed to Ahvaz to visit my sister, Esmat—the same sister who had married without inviting me. When I reached their house and rang the bell, the door opened. My sister froze the moment she saw me; she couldn't believe it was really me. Her husband came out too and welcomed me in. I stepped inside, but my sister remained standing there, dazed.
Her husband chatted away, jumping from one topic to another, but my sister wouldn't even bring me a cup of tea. 'Your brother has just arrived,' her husband urged, 'please, bring him a large tea.' Yet, she seemed gripped by a strange fear and refused to cooperate. Later, her father-in-law arrived with his two wives and children to welcome me before heading out.
As night fell, my sister laid out a bed for me in the hall. 'Mansour is tired,' she told her husband, 'let him sleep until tomorrow.'
'Fine,' he replied, 'you go ahead to bed. I'll join you soon.' But he stayed by my side, continuing the conversation as if he were searching for something—perhaps trying to see if the stories he had heard about me were true. What he was seeing, however, was a far cry from what he had been told. Twice more, my sister called out to him: 'Mansour is exhausted, come to bed.' It was past two in the morning

when he finally caught the fatigue in my eyes; it was as if he had discovered something new in me. He stood up, paused for a second, pointed his finger toward me, and said, 'Well then, goodnight... until tomorrow.'

Not long after they went to their room, I heard them whispering. I realized he was confronting her about the misinformation she had given him. 'The things you told me about your brother weren't true,' I heard him say. I could feel the weight of their conversation even in my half-asleep state, right until I felt my sister press a soft kiss onto my forehead.

When I woke up the next morning, she was no longer the sister I knew. She held her head high, no longer ashamed to have a brother like me. Breakfast was set in the courtyard, and as we sat together, I noticed a television set covered with a cloth, acting as a stand for a flowerpot.

'Do you watch TV in the yard?' I asked.

They laughed. 'No, it’s broken. We just thought it looked nice as a stand.'

'If you don't mind,' I said, 'let me take a look at it.'

Her father-in-law shook his head. 'Don't exhaust yourself; it’s broken.'

'That’s exactly why I want to see it,' I replied. 'If it were working, there’d be no reason to look.'

They agreed. I opened the back of the set, found the fault, and soldered a disconnected wire. I plugged it in and hit the power button. The screen flickered to life, and the yard was filled with their sudden joy.

We moved the television inside, and I hooked up the antenna, but the reception was poor. I climbed onto the roof to adjust it, even attaching an aluminum plate to the antenna to boost the signal. The picture cleared up, and the problem was solved.

My sister realized that her perception of me had been entirely wrong, but I still carried the sting of not being invited to her wedding.

'I’ve been to the weddings of almost every acquaintance,' I told her. 'How could I not be at my own sister’s wedding? I don't even have a single photo of it.'

'I’m sorry,' she replied. 'Remember when you took time off work to be there for my first suitor? When that didn't work

out and you returned late, you got into a fight with your boss and lost your job. So, when the next suitor came, my sisters said there was no need to tell you—they didn't want you to lose your job again.'
'That doesn't matter to me,' I said. 'How can I explain to people that I wasn't there? I have no memory, no photo.'
Her brother-in-law stepped in. 'He’s right. I’d be upset too.' Then he had an idea: 'You still have the wedding clothes. Put them back on, and let your brother stand beside you for a photo. No one will know the difference, and it’ll be a beautiful memento.'
So, the bride and groom dressed up again. Her brother-in-law snapped several photos and took the film to be developed. But when the prints came back a few days later, they were all ruined—the film had been exposed to light.
I stayed in Ahvaz for a few more days before heading to Tehran to pick up my souvenirs. With a full pocket, I returned to Rasht and distributed the gifts.
My sister Rukhsareh’s husband gave me some advice: 'Let me open a savings account for you so you can deposit your money and withdraw it gradually. Or better yet, buy two of those new shops in front of the Agha Syed Abbas Mosque in Sagharisazan; they are fifteen thousand tomans each. It would be a great investment for your future.'
At the time, a brand-new Paykan cost about thirty thousand tomans. Reluctantly, I put thirty thousand in the bank and spent the rest with my friend, Mohammad-Ali.
Two weeks later, I said my goodbyes and reported for military service, only to be told to come back in another month. I went to the city of Shahi with Mohammad-Ali, where I had worked for a while. My former landlord still had my photo hanging on the wall.
After sharing more gifts with friends there, I finally headed back to Rasht.

Military Service and Clashes with Commanders

"As long as I had money, Mohammad-Ali stayed by my side. That lasted until I finally reported for duty. He accompanied me all the way to the bus, and by the time I stepped on, I had only five hundred tomans left in my pocket. As the bus pulled away, I scanned the faces of the other passengers, looking for someone I knew. I spotted an old acquaintance from my gambling days; he was already busy recruiting players for a game on the bus. His trade was scavenging—picking through trash for copper, zinc, or glass to sell just to fund his gambling habits.

I tried to talk sense into him. 'We're heading into service,' I said. 'We'll need every cent because the mess hall food is barely edible. It's a shame to take these boys' money or lose what little you have.' He wouldn't listen. At first, he won a bit, but then he lost everything. He had no family to lean on during his service.

Late that night, our bus reached **Jajrud**, the place where we were to undergo our basic training. They marched us into a building and lined us up. One by one, they called our names, handed us a set of fatigues, and pointed us toward a soldier to get our heads shaved.

Knowing the regulations, I had already cut my hair short before coming. When I told the sergeant my hair was already short, he barked, 'Silence! Go sit there and get it cut!'

I had no choice but to sit in the barber's chair. The soldier was ruthless; using an old, un-oiled pair of manual clippers, he tore at my hair instead of cutting it. My hair kept getting snagged in the blades, but I managed to slip away as quickly as I could. The next man in line wasn't so lucky; his cry of protest brought over a sergeant—a man two meters tall with hands the size of dinner plates. He delivered a heavy blow to the man's head and shouted, 'This is the army, not your aunt's house! No sissy behavior here!'

They had issued us undershirts that seemed to stretch ten centimeters every time we washed them, so I started trimming them with scissors. It was there that I saw men showering while still wearing their undershirts; it reminded me of old Western movies. Some even scrubbed themselves

with laundry detergent, which baffled me, though it certainly left their skin glowing beet-red.
The only saving grace of basic training was the diversity of the recruits. We were a mix from different cities, with various languages and cultures, each carrying their own burdens. Most came from poor families; the wealthy rarely saw the inside of a barracks. They had the means to secure medical exemptions or arranged it so they only stayed at the base during the day. But in basic training, those privileges didn't exist—the camps were too remote for that.
One day, we were standing in the mess line; lunch that day was *Ash* (a thick Persian soup). Sergeant Azizi stood over the soldiers, supervising the distribution and keeping everything under his thumb. As each man got his bowl, he would find a corner in the courtyard to sit and wait for his friends so they could eat together.
I was eating with two others when my friend suddenly froze. There, in his bowl, was a dead mouse—or rather, just its hollowed-out skin, the contents long gone. The sight turned his stomach instantly; he dropped his bowl on the ground and began to retch.
Seeing this, Sergeant Azizi marched toward us. 'Why did you spill your soup on the ground?' he demanded.
'There was a baby mouse in it,' my friend managed to say.
Azizi’s face flushed with rage. 'Put your bowls down right here,' he barked at the three of us, 'and get to my office. Wait for me there.'
We set our bowls down—though I had already finished more than half of mine—and waited outside his door.
He arrived with an air of arrogant defiance and began hurling insults. 'You’ve barely arrived and you're already starting a mutiny! They call me Sergeant Azizi; I’ll make the birds in the sky weep for the misery I’ll bring upon you!'
He pointed to the one who had found the mouse. 'You. Into my room.'
Terrified, the boy stepped inside. Seconds after the door slammed shut, we heard his muffled cry: 'Why are you hitting me?' A few moments later, he stumbled out. 'I lied,' he muttered, 'there was no mouse in the food.' Then he hurried away.

'Next!' the Sergeant bellowed.
The second man went in. This time, the room was silent. A few minutes later, he emerged looking defeated. 'When he says he lied, why should we say it was there?' he whispered, and he too walked away.
Then, it was my turn.
'Get in here!' Azizi roared.
I stepped into his office. He paced back and forth, looking at me with disdain. 'I suppose you're going to tell me you didn't see anything either, and that you were all just making a fuss over nothing.'
I looked him straight in the eye. 'If you mean seeing the mouse in the bowl of soup,' I said firmly, 'then yes—I saw it.
Upon hearing this, he unfurled his clenched fist and delivered a thunderous slap to my ear. I was flung to the ground, but I didn't lose my nerve. I scrambled up quickly and stood my ground.
'So,' he sneered, 'you didn't see anything.'
'You can beat me until dawn,' I replied, 'and I will still say there was a mouse in the food. Unless, of course, you apologize to us.'
He lost his temper completely. 'So it was you! You're the ringleader who incited the others!'
He began to beat me. I kept telling him, 'You have no right to hit me,' but he wouldn't listen. He lashed out until his face was drenched in sweat from the exertion. Then, he brought over an *Arj* metal chair. 'Lift this over your head and stand on one leg,' he barked, 'to help you remember that you saw nothing.'
'I'm not lifting that chair,' I said. 'Beat me as much as you want. I'll either live or die. If I live, I'll give you an answer outside these gates that will ensure you never lay a hand on another soldier again. Unless you apologize.'
Still gasping for breath, he said, 'I'll let you off this time. But if you utter a word to anyone, you'll answer to me.'
I looked at him. 'I have nothing to lose that would force my silence. I'm telling you again: there was a mouse in the food today, and I saw it with my own eyes. Even if the mouse itself said it wasn't there, I'd say it was. And now, instead of apologizing, you threaten me again? Outside of here, you

aren't a sergeant and I’m not your soldier. The choice is yours.'
In a fit of frustrated rage, he walked over, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said quietly, 'I was angry. I’m sorry. I have to act this way, otherwise, I can't survive in this place.'
'Can I go now?' I asked.
He pleaded with me not to tell anyone. 'Fine,' I said, and walked out.
The next day, when I saw him, he looked ashamed of his actions. 'You’re the first person to ever slip through my fingers,' he admitted. 'I never thought you’d hold out like that.'
'You’re lucky you didn't end up my murderer,' I told him, 'because I had decided not to give in, even if it meant death.'
From that day on, he was never harsh with me during training.
Once, while we were all lined up, a lean Chief Warrant Officer—who was trying to make a fearsome first impression—addressed us: 'In this course, we will hurl many insults at you, just to weed out the weak. Remember, an insult is like a letter without an address—it always returns to the sender.
A few days later, that same Chief Warrant Officer cursed at me because my foot was slightly out of line. I shot back: 'An insult is a letter without an address; it returns to its owner.'
He froze. 'Step out!' he barked. 'Wait until Sergeant Azizi gets here—he’ll teach you how to talk.'
When Azizi arrived, the Warrant Officer ordered him: 'Make this soldier crawl on his belly until he understands what the army is all about.'
But Azizi leaned in and whispered something in his ear that made the officer suddenly say, 'Never mind, let him go.'
Azizi took me aside, looking annoyed. 'The Warrant Officer told me to punish you. Look, this is a training camp; there’s no such thing as extra service time here. We’re forced to use physical punishment to break soldiers. If you can just endure these four months, it’s better for everyone. At least don't protest in front of the others.' I agreed.
On Fridays, the camp was off, but we had nowhere to go except nearby villages to buy food. The mess hall food was

atrocious—lentils and rice so full of stones we jokingly called it 'Buckshot Pilaf' (*Sachmeh-Polo*). My friend who had gambled away his money on the bus had nothing. 'I told you not to gamble,' I reminded him, before lending him some cash.

When the four months ended, the assignments to different cities began. Favoritism was rampant. Those with connections went back to their hometowns. I had no one and was slated for Urmia. I asked around: 'What's Urmia like?' Everyone said, 'The winters are brutal.'

I told Azizi, 'I don't want to go to Urmia. I want to go to Qazvin because my brother is there.'

He told me, 'The bus for Qazvin leaves the day after tomorrow. You need to hide yourself tomorrow so the Urmia bus leaves without you. Then I'll slip your name onto the Qazvin list.' I did exactly as he said. By writing my name down, he finally made amends for the beating.

As I was boarding the Qazvin bus, the Warrant Officer stopped me. 'You're assigned to Urmia.'

Azizi stepped in: 'He was sick yesterday; someone else went to Urmia in his place.'

'Is your family in Qazvin?' the officer asked me.

'No,' I replied.

'Fine, get on.'

I boarded with a sigh of relief, happy to be heading to Qazvin...

But I wish I hadn't gone.

We arrived at the 16th Armored Division of Qazvin at night. Ten of us were assigned to the logistics unit. Most were veteran soldiers with their own vehicles—some were drivers for commanders, others were mechanics. They assigned me a small Volkswagen ambulance.

Once a week was 'Maintenance Day,' when everyone had to clean their vehicles. Our commander was Captain Omrani, whose promotion to Major had been delayed, and he was desperate for that next stripe. There was also a Chief Warrant Officer from the north in charge of the warehouse; he controlled everything from food supplies to the personal items of the non-commissioned officers. The Captain's deputy was Sergeant Saadati.

The next day, Sergeant Saadati gathered us all in front of the unit and announced that Captain Omrani would be coming. When the Captain arrived, he ordered the ten of us to step out of the line and introduce ourselves. After the introductions, they marched us to the morning parade ground for the ceremony.

Our unit was full of rough characters. Everyone tried to slip out of the barracks on Fridays—either by sneaking out or by getting official leave. Until that day, my brother had no idea I was serving in Qazvin; he thought I had been sent to Urmia. Then, one Thursday, I managed to get leave and went to the office where he worked.

I asked the guard to tell my brother that I was waiting for him at the entrance. The guard returned with him. 'What are you doing here?' my brother asked, stunned.

'I'm serving right here, in the Qazvin barracks,' I replied.

We went inside his office, and I sat by him until his shift ended. Then, we hopped into his Paykan, did some shopping, and headed to his place.

His home was a small room with a window facing the alley and a tiny kitchen cluttered with canned goods—half of them empty.

'Are you hungry?' he asked.

'No,' I said, 'I just came to see you.'

'Stay here,' he told me, 'I'll be right back.'

He disappeared into the kitchen, and soon the smell of burning onions wafted through the air. I thought to myself, *'He must be cooking; poor guy is going to so much trouble for me.'*

I got up to see if he needed any help, but to my surprise, there was no food in sight. He was smoking opium and burning onions to mask the scent from the neighbors. When he saw me, he was startled. 'The tea will be ready soon. Go back inside, I'll join you.'

'At least come sit in the room,' I said. 'I took leave just to see you.'

He eventually brought in the brazier, the opium pipe, and the tea. 'Don't ever go down this path,' he warned me. Then, he opened a tin of tuna, and we ate it with some bread.

It was clear he wasn't happy to see me; he saw me as an

intruder in his private world. I visited him a few more times after that. Each time, he would take me to one of his friends' places just so they could smoke. Some were orchard owners, and their braziers were always ready in the gardens.

Back at the barracks, I was slowly finding my place and making friends. But I knew these friendships were fleeting—just like military service itself. Every month, a couple of people would leave, and new faces would take their place.

One night, it was my first time on guard duty. Sergeant Saadati took the three of us who were assigned for the night to the motor pool, where about forty vehicles were parked. He began the briefing:

'The Deputy Division Commander is the Duty Officer tonight,' he warned. 'He's a dangerous man. Most people on night watch have been caught off guard by him. Stay alert. First, you shout Halt! If they don't comply, you rack the slide for the second Halt! If they still don't stop, the third *Halt!* Then, you shoot for the legs.'

He stationed one of us there and told the other two to get some sleep until our shift. Two hours later, it was my turn. He woke me up, again emphasizing that I must be careful.

'Don't worry,' I said.

I took over the post and began patrolling alone. Not even thirty minutes had passed when I saw someone approaching the parking lot. As he passed under the streetlamp, I recognized Sergeant Saadati. I walked toward him and asked, 'What happened? Why are you back?'

He snapped at me, hurling insults. 'Why didn't you shout *Halt*? If that had been the Duty Officer, we'd be finished!'

'First of all, watch your tone,' I shot back. 'And second, once I recognized you, why on earth would I challenge you?'

He insulted me again. I lost my patience. 'I'm going to count to three,' I said. 'If you don't leave, I swear to God I'll shoot.'

He got scared. 'Fine, I'm going. But I'll settle the score with you tomorrow.'

'Fine,' I said. 'We'll see.'

I continued my patrol, still fuming. Thirty minutes later, someone else approached. 'He's back again!' I thought. I

quietly moved behind the vehicles. In the dark, I couldn't make out the face. I gave the first Halt, then dropped to the ground, racked the slide of my rifle, and gave the second *Halt*. It didn't even get to the third; the person turned and bolted!

Two hours later, my shift ended. Saadati returned with another soldier, flashing his light to show they were friendly. I ignored the gesture. 'Password?' I demanded. He was forced to give it. I handed over the post and went to sleep without a word.

At dawn, we were woken by the bugle. I turned my rifle into the armory, and we lined up. Captain Omrani arrived. It was his habit to inspect every single soldier—shoes, trousers, shirt, hair, and nails. If he found a flaw, he would stare intensely into your eyes. If you lowered your gaze, he'd deliver a slap. Almost everyone had tasted his hand.

When he reached me, he noticed I wasn't wearing an undershirt. 'Why aren't you wearing one?' he barked.

He stared into my eyes with pure aggression. I stared right back, unblinking. He realized I wasn't going to back down. 'Let this be the last time!' he muttered and moved to the next man.

I glanced at Sergeant Saadati standing by the door, as if to say, *'See? You couldn't do a thing.*

Captain Omrani finished the inspection and addressed the unit: 'Something happened at the guard post last night.'

I thought to myself, *'That coward Saadati went and snitched on me!'*

But the Captain continued, 'The Deputy Division Commander told me this morning: I tried to enter the motor pool last night, and the guard gave such a fierce challenge that I nearly wet myself!'

He then asked, 'Who was the guard at the motor pool at 3:00 AM?'

Sergeant Saadati pointed toward me.

Despite his clear dislike for me, the Captain asked, 'How many times have you stood guard before?'

'It was my first time, sir,' I replied.

'Well done!' he said. 'One week of incentive leave.'

Realizing that Saadati hadn't snitched, I decided to play it smart: 'Captain, I learned the art of guarding well from

Sergeant Saadati.'
'Excellent,' the Captain added, 'two days of leave for him as well.'
I ended up giving my leave to a fellow soldier from a village who was the sole provider for his family.
A few days later, word came that an important guest would be visiting the barracks in two weeks. The barracks had to be decorated, and we were asked for ideas. I decided to create a 3D relief of **Shahyad Square** (Azadi Tower) on the back wall using yarn, along with eight 'virtual windows' showing landscapes. No one else stepped up with a plan, so I bought the materials and started working.
The barracks transformed. Everyone said, 'It doesn't even matter if we win; it looks beautiful.'
On the day of the visit, the national anthem *'Long Live Our Shah'* echoed across the parade ground. Brigadier General Motamedi announced that the guest was **Prince Gholamreza Pahlavi**.
We were moved away from the barracks while the judging took place. Our unit won. I was granted a month of leave, the Sergeant got a week, and Captain Omrani earned the points he needed for his promotion.
A few days later, I was assigned to clean the warehouse. The veteran soldier in charge did nothing but bark orders. I organized the warehouse according to my own taste. He snapped at me: 'If you don't listen to me, I won't take you on fatigue duty anymore!' And the next time, he crossed my name off the list!
One day, during 'Maintenance Day,' all the soldiers headed out to clean their vehicles. I tried to start the ambulance assigned to me, but the engine wouldn't turn over. I reported it to the Sergeant.
'My vehicle won't start,' I said.
'Many soldiers end up with extra service time because their batteries die,' he replied. 'You’re supposed to run the engine for thirty minutes every day to keep the battery charged.'
'It makes no sense to have forty vehicles idling for half an hour every single day just to charge the batteries,' I argued.
He shrugged. 'Well, it’s better than getting extra service!'

I knew this was a flawed system and needed a solution. A few days later, I explained to the Sergeant that this practice was causing unnecessary air pollution. He just mocked me: 'It is what it is! Either pollution or extra service. If you don't want the penalty, run the engine.'

That evening, when the soldiers gathered in the barracks, I addressed them: 'You've been issued old vehicles with worn-out batteries. You don't have the time to start them every day, especially those of you going on missions. In the end, you'll be slapped with extra service time for failed batteries.'

I proposed that we all chip in to buy a battery charger. I suggested that on Maintenance Days, anyone whose car wouldn't start could bring their battery to me to be charged. Everyone agreed. A few men were tasked with researching an affordable and reliable machine.

One of the guys, whose father dealt in automotive equipment, helped us find a good, low-cost charger. We split the cost, and with the officer's permission, we set it up in a small room in front of the warehouse. I took full responsibility for the operation.

While the batteries were charging, I would help organize the warehouse. The Chief Warrant Officer, noticing my knack for organization, told the Commander: 'I want Private Mansour for the warehouse.'

The Commander agreed, and I became the **Storekeeper for the Artillery Headquarters**. My duties included managing rations for the non-commissioned officers, combat rations, and issuing or collecting uniforms. Even if a uniform was torn, it had to be returned; otherwise, the soldier faced extra service.

As long as I was the storekeeper and in charge of the battery charging, not a single soldier in our unit served an extra day due to uniform shortages or dead batteries. I even extended my help to soldiers from other units.

My management of the warehouse had given the Chief Warrant Officer complete peace of mind. Sometimes he wouldn't even show up, saying:

'Since you took over, I haven't spent a single day worrying about the warehouse. I'm at ease knowing you're here.'

Of course, this caused resentment among some of the

others. They never saw me at military drills or the morning parades, and some even complained to the commander about my absence from the morning routines.
Personally, I didn't care for those ceremonies either, especially having to sing the imperial anthem every single day.
One day, the weapons instructor announced:
'We’re moving the weapons training class right next to the warehouse so you can participate too.'
The class was held the next day, focusing on the assembly and disassembly of rifles. I stood by the warehouse door, watching intermittently as I moved in and out to attend to my duties. This annoyed the Sergeant in charge of the class.
'You need to pay attention and learn!' he barked.
'I already know how,' I replied.
'If you’re so skilled,' he challenged, 'lock the warehouse and come disassemble this G3.'
'If you like,' I said, 'you can even blindfold me.'
'Fine,' he snapped. 'If you can do it blindfolded, you’re excused from my class forever. But if you fail, you’ll attend every single session.'
I went into the warehouse, grabbed a piece of cloth, sat down, and placed the rifle across my lap. The Sergeant checked the blindfold to make sure I couldn't see a thing. I began stripping every part of the weapon and then reassembling it perfectly. Everyone was stunned; they actually broke into applause.
After that day, no more weapons classes were ever held near my warehouse.
Then, one day, I developed such an agonizing pain in my groin that even sitting or standing became a struggle. Whenever I rose from my chair, I couldn't put any weight on my right leg. I had to pull myself up on one leg and wait a while before I could slowly, painfully, touch my right foot to the ground...

The 1978 Revolution and the Warrant for My Arrest

"Gradually, the labor strikes in Tehran began to take on a political tone. Even the representatives in Parliament had started to voice their protests. Inside the warehouse, I had a radio and followed the news closely. Whenever the non-commissioned officers came in, I would turn up the volume so they could hear it too. Sometimes I'd even tell them, 'Look, even the MPs are speaking out now.'

A couple of sergeants had reported this to Captain Omrani, who was just looking for an excuse to bring me down. One day, the Chief Warrant Officer walked into the warehouse, locked the door behind him, and said with visible anxiety: 'Let's go to the back of the warehouse. I need to tell you something.'

We went to the far end. He glanced around cautiously and whispered:

'A few people went to Captain Omrani and snitched on you. They told him you keep the radio on and listen to political news. He's looking for any pretext to kick you out of here. If he throws you out, I'll be paralyzed. For God's sake, turn off that damn radio.'

Then he looked at me and asked, 'Are you political?'

'Me? Not at all,' I replied. 'How is this political? I'm listening to the state radio!'

'Just watch your step,' he warned. 'I've got your back, but if you turn out to be political, don't count on me. Because if that's the case, I'll be the first one to take you down.'

Days passed, and the strikes grew more serious and widespread. Inside the barracks, everyone was watching everyone else's behavior. Amidst all this, the pain in my leg returned, accompanied by a high fever. I was forced to go to the army hospital and was admitted for two days. They ran various tests but found nothing specific. Finally, the doctor said:

'You have Malta Fever (Brucellosis).'

'What is Malta Fever?' I asked.

'It comes from dairy,' he said. 'Do you drink a lot of milk or eat much yogurt?'

'I actually hate milk,' I told him, 'and I barely touch yogurt.'

He was puzzled. My fever was over 40 degrees Celsius

(104°F), yet despite the heat raging in my body, I could still walk with ease.
On the evening of the second day, a couple of the guys came to visit me. They told me that Captain Omrani had come by the beds during the morning rounds. One of them had asked, 'How is Mansour doing?'
The Captain had sneered and replied, 'Mansour has just started his period!'
Hearing this cut me to the quick. Despite my condition, I checked myself out of the hospital and limped all the way back to the barracks.
The next morning, as we stood at attention by our beds, Captain Omrani arrived. When he saw me, he asked, 'Are you feeling better?'
'Not exactly, Captain,' I replied. 'But word reached me that yesterday you claimed I was hospitalized because I had "started my period." I left the hospital just to come here and tell you that talking behind someone’s back is not what real men do. By the way, Captain—do men even have periods?'
The Captain was visibly shaken. He clearly hadn't expected his words to get back to me so quickly. He glanced around the room, trying to figure out who had snitched, but he couldn't tell. From that day on, he was looking for any opportunity to exact his revenge.
As the protests intensified, our division was put on high alert. We were ordered to prepare for a two-day field exercise. As the storekeeper, I was responsible for getting all the gear ready. I was so overwhelmed with work that I completely forgot I was also officially in charge of the ambulance, which another soldier had been maintaining for some time.
With the help of a few soldiers, we loaded the truck with tents and provisions and headed to a forested area outside Qazvin to set up camp. Unknown to me, two of the soldiers who had helped me load the truck had stashed two bottles of liquor among the warehouse supplies.
Meanwhile, a few of the guys from Tehran had hatched a plan: after dinner, they would pretend the food was poisoned and fall ill, hoping to be sent back to the barracks —knowing that with the base nearly empty, they could slip away to Tehran.

About half an hour later, I noticed one of the two soldiers grab something from the truck and disappear. Shortly after, the Sergeant came over to me.
'I heard you've got some liquor,' he said.
'What? Liquor?' I replied. 'I don't touch the stuff.'
'Don't make this hard on yourself,' he urged. 'Tonight, I want to have a drink and a good time with Captain Rahnama (who was from the Second Bureau and had replaced Captain Omrani for this mission).'
I stood my ground. 'I don't drink, and I don't know anything about it. Come up and search the truck yourself. If you find anything, it's yours.'
He flared up. 'Woe betide you if I find any liquor tonight!'
He left and began scouring the tents until he caught two soldiers sitting in a corner, drinking. He pressured them immediately: 'Tell me where you got that, or each of you gets a month of extra service.'
One of them cracked. 'We took it from the supply truck...'
The Sergeant smirked. 'If you don't bring me a bottle of liquor tonight, you're both getting that month of extra service. The choice is yours.
The Sergeant told them he'd be waiting in his tent for the liquor to be delivered.
Oblivious to everything, I was having my dinner at the back of the truck when one of the two men who had helped me load the supplies approached. 'I have something of mine in there,' he said, 'I need to grab it from the back.'
'Go ahead,' I replied.
I didn't realize the Sergeant had been tailing him. He arrived exactly at the critical moment, snatched the bottle from the man's hand, and turned to me. 'I don't want to ruin my day today,' he sneered, 'but tomorrow, I'm going to settle the score with you.' Then he left.
Dinner was distributed, and everyone retreated to their tents. Less than an hour later, the camp was filled with groans and cries of agony. I was still at the back of the truck when I heard the Sergeant shouting my name at the top of his lungs. When I pulled back the truck's canvas, I saw a crowd gathered around the ambulance. One of its tires was flat. Everyone was frantically searching for the spare, but it was nowhere to be found.

They had asked the soldier who brought the ambulance where the spare was, and he had simply told them, 'Mansour is the one in charge of the ambulance.' That’s why the Sergeant was calling for me.
I walked over to the ambulance. The scene looked like a battlefield: one man was writhing on the ground in pain, another had his head slumped on a comrade's shoulder. Two more were already inside the ambulance, waiting. A flat tire, and a useless vehicle.
Captain Rahnama—an officer from the Second Bureau and a SAVAK agent within the army—who had been tasked by Captain Omrani to 'take me down,' was standing there. The Sergeant, acting as if he had just caught a murderer, turned to me and barked, 'You’ve dug your own grave!'
Captain Rahnama asked me with cold fury, 'Where is the spare tire for this ambulance?'
'I don't know,' I replied.
'Aren't you the one responsible for it?' he demanded.
'The ambulance is registered in my name,' I said, 'but someone else has been maintaining it for some time now.
The soldiers who were faking their illness to get back to the barracks were still groaning and wailing in the background. Captain Rahnama, fearing something might actually happen to them, saw this as the perfect opening to settle his score with me. He began hurling vile insults at me:
'You son of a...!'
At that moment, I reached my breaking point. I snapped to attention and shouted at the top of my lungs:
'In the sacred name of my noble father, the Shahanshah Aryamehr, Commander-in-Chief, and my dear mother, the Empress Farah Pahlavi, I am telling you, Captain—you have no right to insult my mother! Be a man and hit me if you must, but do not dare insult the Empress!'
In an instant, the Captain’s face, which had been flushed red from the liquor, turned as white as chalk. He was stunned. It hit him that he had trapped himself in a dangerous position. Perhaps he thought I was a high-ranking undercover intelligence agent, given how firmly and confidently I spoke.
I played my part perfectly. Staring him down from a position of absolute authority, I stepped forward.

'Hit me, if you have the courage,' I challenged him. 'But do not curse my mother. As long as I wear this uniform, my father is the Shahanshah and my mother is the Empress. You're lucky I'm in this uniform, otherwise, you know very well you wouldn't dare insult me.'

The Captain, now visibly shaken, backed away. Several men stepped in to hold me back. The Sergeant, realizing the tide had turned against them, took the Captain by the arm and led him into their tent. I don't know if they finished their liquor or not, but the boys eventually found the spare tire—it had been tucked away in the floor of the ambulance all along.

The 'patients' were driven back to the barracks, and from there, they made their way to Tehran.

Two days later, our field exercise ended. We packed the tents and headed back to the barracks.

The protests, which had started in the capital, began spreading to other cities, eventually reaching Qazvin. Groups of young people launched lightning-fast demonstrations, chanting slogans and dispersing before the police arrived, only to resurface on another street. Day by day, the crowds grew. In Parliament, representatives who sensed the shifting tides began voicing even sharper criticisms.

These protests deeply unsettled those in the Shah's inner circle who controlled the nation's economy. They began transferring their wealth out of Iran. This betrayal sparked an outcry from certain MPs, who demanded that banks disclose the names of those fleeing with the country's capital. In truth, the first group to betray the Shah were the very people who had amassed fortunes under his reign and were now seeking a safe haven for their assets.

As capital flowed out, workers' wages went unpaid. This led to factory closures and a surge in unemployment, forcing the jobless to join the ranks of the protesters. The revolutionary momentum accelerated, and the foundations of the monarchy began to tremble.

The publication of an article against Khomeini in the *Ettela'at* newspaper acted like a spark in a powder keg. Unrest broke out in Qum and Tabriz, resulting in several casualties. On the fortieth day of mourning for the fallen in

Tabriz, Khomeini seized the moment to issue his first proclamation, questioning the legitimacy of the monarchy and championing the people's demands—while most other political leaders were either imprisoned or under surveillance.
The author of that article, whether intentionally or by mistake, pulled Khomeini out of the 'forgotten halls' of Najaf and handed him the role of the people's spokesperson—a role that was solidified after his expulsion from Iraq and arrival in France. Because he was a high-ranking cleric, even the Shah found it difficult to speak out against him directly.
Amidst this turmoil, I continued to provoke several non-commissioned officers by keeping my radio on in the warehouse, broadcasting the speeches of the MPs. I was reported to the commander multiple times. Even the Chief Warrant Officer in charge of the warehouse warned me to turn down the volume.
Then, one day, a hotheaded Sergeant walked in and confronted me:
'I hear you're looking for trouble,' he sneered, 'spreading provocative ideas. Is your head starting to feel a bit too heavy for your shoulders?
I replied, 'You've got it wrong. It's not my head that's too heavy for my shoulders; it's the heads of those Members of Parliament. I haven't said a word.' I turned on the radio and added, 'Here, listen for yourself. Are these my words or theirs?'
He snapped, 'You'll see,' and stormed out.
A few hours later, the Chief Warrant Officer in charge of the warehouse arrived, looking distraught. 'I can't defend you anymore,' he said.
'What happened?' I asked.
'There have been so many complaints against you that Captain Omrani ordered you out of the warehouse. I told him you do the work of seven men, but he said: "I'll give you a whole division of soldiers if you want, but Mansour is not to step foot in that warehouse again."'
He asked me once more, 'Is it true? Are you political? Because if you are, I'll strangle you with my own two

hands.'
He was bluffing, of course; deep down, he was on my side. By then, the protests had spiraled out of the police's control, and the army had been called in as backup. For several days, our unit had been on high alert, stationed near the main gate, ready to assist the police if needed.
On the day I was no longer allowed into the warehouse, I stayed behind in the barracks. The other soldiers had gone to draw their weapons from the armory to stand ready. Only I and the unit clerk remained.
'Captain Omrani is furious with you,' the clerk said. 'That’s why he didn’t let you go out with the rest of them.
But the next day, Captain Omrani approached me and said: 'Get ready, we’re heading into the city.'
'Should I go draw my weapon?' I asked.
He let out a cynical smirk. 'If I give you a rifle, the first thing you’ll do is empty it into my own head!'
'Why would you say such a thing, Captain?' I replied.
'From today, you’re my driver,' he said. 'Go get the keys from the former driver.'
The previous driver warned me: 'The starter is broken. If the engine stalls, you’ll have to push-start it.' I took the keys, and from that day on, I became Captain Omrani’s personal driver.
In the back seat sat a soldier named Saberi, from Mazandaran, equipped with a radio to relay reports to the Captain.
For several days, we entered the city of Qazvin to intimidate the public. We would maneuver through the streets, a show of force to let the people know the army was ready to crack down.
However, in major cities like Tehran, Tabriz, Isfahan, and Qom, the protests had become far more serious. Despite the army's violence, the movement was spreading daily, and the risk of a major clash in Qazvin was rising.
Near the city entrance where our unit was stationed on high alert, there was a gas station. Due to the oil workers' strikes, most stations had run dry. People stood in long lines, sometimes sleeping in their cars to keep their spot. To save fuel, they would even help push each other's cars toward the pumps.

Some would approach us and ask:
'If the people protest, will you fire on them?'
We remained silent, never knowing if they were ordinary citizens or SAVAK informants. But I spoke with my fellow soldiers:
'We'll either have to fire on the people, or we have to desert. We don't want to open fire on our own brothers and sisters.'
They would reply:
'You're a veteran soldier with only four months left. Why don't you desert first? The moment you run, we'll follow you.
For several days, my job became talking to the soldiers and"
...preparing them to desert

Desertion and Joining the Protests

"One day, the unit clerk came to me and said:
'Things are getting very dangerous for you.'
'What's happened?' I asked.
'First, swear you won't tell a soul,' he whispered.
I gave my word. He continued in a low voice:
'Captain Omrani has drafted a report against you and sent it to Colonel Nobari, the Deputy Division Commander. He, in turn, forwarded it to the Second Bureau (Military Intelligence). Now, the Second Bureau has summoned Captain Omrani to explain your conduct immediately.'
He showed me the letter and added:
'I haven't handed the summons to the Captain yet. With the number of deserters rising these days, I'm afraid they might try to make an example out of you. You'd better think of something, and fast.'
'Try not to give him the letter today,' I said. 'Let's see what happens.'
He agreed.
That same day, as usual, I was waiting with the vehicle in front of the main gate for Captain Omrani to arrive. Once he showed up, we headed with his unit to our station near the

gas station. Other units were also stationed at various points across the city.
I was busy watching the long line at the pumps when my eyes suddenly fell upon my brother, Torab. He was five years older than me, standing in line with his Citroën Dyane (Jiyan). I wasn't allowed to leave my post, so I waved at him. No matter how much I waved, he didn't notice. Another man, thinking I wanted something from him, approached. I pointed out my brother and asked the man to tell him I was there. He went over to Torab, and my brother came to see me.
After our greetings, I asked, 'What are you doing here?'
'Tehran is in total chaos,' he said. 'The company I worked for shut down. I thought I'd come visit our older brother here, and then head back to Rasht.'
Until that day, he had no idea I was serving in Qazvin. I told him:
'Things are getting more chaotic here by the day. I refuse to stand against the people; I want to be among them. My situation at the barracks is critical. I have to desert.'
'Well, then run now,' Torab said.
'I can't right this second,' I replied. 'But do something for me. If you can, find a woman's chador and meet me tomorrow at 7:00 AM at the parking lot behind the main gate. That's where I'll make my move.'
He promised he would be there.
The next morning, all the soldiers were lined up in front of the main gate. As Captain Omrani's driver, I was at the front of the line. I turned to my friend, the radio operator, and said:
'I need to tell you something, but you must swear not to tell anyone.'
'I swear,' he replied.
'I'm deserting today.'
'I'm coming with you!' he said, his face lighting up.
'No, don't mess up the plan,' I told him. 'You come later. For now, it has to be just me.'
He struggled to accept it, but finally relented. I added: 'As you know, if the engine stalls, it won't restart because of the broken starter. If the Commander asks where I am, tell him the car died and I went to find help to jump-start it.'

Just then, Brigadier General Motamedi, the Division Commander, arrived in his car. All the officers rushed to greet him and snapped to attention. I cut the engine.
'Goodbye,' I whispered to my friend.
While every soldier stood frozen at attention, I quietly slipped toward the guardhouse. I told the guard:
'I don’t feel well, I need to use the restroom. I’m going behind the parking lot; I'll be right back.'
Since he was also at attention, he didn't say a word. I slipped through the small back door into the parking lot, but no matter where I looked, there was no sign of Torab. With no other choice and still in full uniform—in a city crawling with military police hunting for deserters—I began sprinting through the back alleys toward my older brother’s house.
I knew people realized I was running. I even overheard someone whisper to the person next to him:
'Look, that soldier is deserting!'
Terrified and in a frantic rush, I made it to my brother’s house. I rang the bell several times. Looking down from the upstairs window, my eldest brother spotted me. He called out to the middle one: 'Mansour is at the door!'
He came down and opened it. 'Why didn't you show up?!' I demanded.
'I was there,' he claimed. 'I waited a long time. When you didn't appear, I figured you’d changed your mind, so I came back.'
We went upstairs. The room was thick with the pungent smell of onions; they were busy smoking opium. It was obvious he was lying—the ash was still fresh on his clothes.
'I have to get out of Qazvin immediately,' I told them. 'The city is crawling with Military Police. My hair is cropped short; they’ll spot me as a soldier in a heartbeat. If I get caught here, it’ll be trouble for all of you.'
I stripped off my uniform and changed into civilian clothes. I turned to Torab: 'If you’re heading to Rasht, let’s go together. If not, just drop me at the Qazvin gate so I can catch a shared taxi.'
He said he had just arrived and wanted to stay for a few days. So, he dropped me off at the intercity taxi stand.

There was a Mercedes-Benz with three passengers already in the back. The driver was waiting for two more to fill the front seat.
'Are you going to Rasht?' I asked.
'Yes,' he replied, 'hop in.'
I got in. Since he was still waiting for one last passenger, I told him: 'Just start driving. I'll pay for the empty seat too.
We set off. One of the passengers turned to me and asked, 'Are you a soldier?'
'Yes,' I replied, 'I managed to get some leave.'
They laughed. 'We aren't soldiers, but we know perfectly well that in this chaos, no soldier is granted leave. It's obvious you've deserted!'
I gave a bitter smile. 'You're right, they don't give leave. But my mother's health was failing, and thanks to some connections I had back at the barracks, I was able to get out.'
'And do you plan to go back when your leave is over?' they asked.
'I don't know,' I said.
They began to advise me. 'You're lucky you got leave. Things are falling apart, and soldiers are deserting in droves.' One added, 'Just yesterday, a soldier opened fire on his commander, killing and wounding several people.' They urged me not to go back. 'Alright,' I said.
When we reached Rasht and I stepped out of the car, it felt like I had entered a different country! There was no sign of any protests. Three or four days passed. I called the barracks and asked the clerk, 'What's the news?'
'Out of fifty-two men in our unit, only seven or eight are left,' he said. 'It's a good thing you called; after you left, rumors spread that you'd been arrested. Try not to call again—they might be monitoring the lines.'
The next day, my brother Torab arrived from Qazvin. Seeing that Rasht was quiet, we decided to take action ourselves. As dusk fell, we headed to
the **Sagharisazan** neighborhood. Standing a few meters apart, we began chanting slogans. Soon, two or three young men joined us. It was clear the people were ready; they were just waiting for someone to make the first move.

The crowd grew quickly. Before long, two police cars sped toward us, and everyone scattered.
The next day, we gathered again, and our numbers grew steadily. Scattered protests began popping up across different streets in Rasht. However, we weren't satisfied; we felt that while every city in Iran mattered, Tehran was the heart of it all. As the capital, it was where the international journalists and news agencies were based, making it the best place for our voices to be heard.
So, we left Rasht for Tehran to join the main demonstrations. My brother had a room on Si-Metri Jamadi-al-Haq Street where he lived. My aunt’s house was also nearby. Her husband was said to have been a member of the Tudeh Party, and they had two sons, Majid and Mahmoud.
Mahmoud was the eldest, and I hadn't realized how deeply religious he was. His mother used to say, 'My eldest won't even attend family parties because there's music and dancing.' We went to the protests together for a few days, and his mother would always plead with us to look after him, saying, 'I’m entrusting my son to you.' But the truth was quite the opposite; he and his friends were the ones planning exactly where to demonstrate the next day. I later discovered he was a member of the **Motalefeh Islamic Coalition Party** and attended their secret meetings.
One day, he told us, 'There’s a sit-in at Tehran University today, and Ayatollah Taleghani is expected to join the protesters.' We headed to the university. A massive crowd of young people filled the campus, while outside, the military was stationed with armored vehicles.
The students inside were trying to prevent a clash, wanting to keep the protest within the gates to avoid giving the military a pretext to attack. However, a group gathered behind the university fences was urging us to come out and take the protest to the streets. Helicopters circled incessantly overhead.
It seemed the military also preferred us not to stay inside; as long as we remained on campus, they had no excuse to charge. The pressure from outside mounted by the minute. It felt as if a specific group had the mission to draw the

students out, forcing the military to show its true, violent face to the public.
What struck us as odd was why the soldiers weren't bothered by the people behind the fences; it was as if they were one of them. Those outside began chanting slogans and provoking the guards, eventually surging toward the university gates to pull the insiders into the fray.
The moment tear gas was launched into the campus, students began scaling the walls and pouring out of the gates. It seemed the army had received orders to end it once and for all. That day, Tehran turned into a war zone. The sound of gunfire echoed across the city, and more and more people were drawn toward **24 Esfand Square**.
The wail of sirens was relentless. Protesters with bloodstained hands raised high were pleading with everyone to rush to the hospitals to help the wounded. A strange, collective spirit had taken hold; everyone was doing whatever they could with all their heart and soul. Word spread quickly that hospitals were facing a dire shortage of blood, linens, and cotton. My brother Torab and I spent every last cent in our pockets to buy cotton and bandages, joining the crowds heading toward one of the medical centers. It was a surreal day. At the hospital, urgent announcements were being made for people to leave and take the wounded with them as quickly as possible, fearing the military might raid the building and seize the injured.
The following day, we went to Behesht-e Zahra cemetery. It was only then that we realized the true scale of the massacre. Bodies were being buried one after another. Many whispered that out of fear of SAVAK, some families had resorted to burying their dead inside their own homes. It felt as though a shroud of death had been cast over Tehran. Most shops were shuttered. Municipal workers, alongside the military, were busy clearing away charred tires and burnt-out cars, attempting to scrub the city of the evidence of the violence.
Many banks had been gutted by fire. I wondered why the banks were being targeted, until an acquaintance—a bank employee himself—told me: 'Many bank managers have pocketed the people's money and documents for

themselves. In this chaos, they are paying individuals to incite the crowds to burn the banks down, so they can cover their tracks and walk away with the public's life savings.'
Two or three days later, my cousin told us that we were to gather at Tehran University the next day, and from there, march toward the residence of Ayatollah Taleghani. He told us the house was under a full military blockade.
The next day, we went to the Gomrok district, bought some second-hand clothes, and headed to the rear wall of one of the military barracks located between Gomrok and 24 Esfand Square. We began tossing the clothes over the wall to the soldiers inside, so they could change into civilian attire and desert.
Later, we moved toward 24 Esfand Square. Word reached us that the 'Constitutionalist' thugs had mobilized from Shahyad Square, armed with clubs and sticks, beating anyone and destroying everything in their path. It wasn't long before they reached us. They attacked the crowd so brutally that everyone scrambled to flee. I was running in high-heeled shoes when one of the heels snapped off, causing me to lose my balance. If it weren't for a few people who grabbed me and pulled me into a house, I would have been trampled under the feet of that mob.
When I regained my composure, I realized a large crowd was packed into the stairwell of this four-story house. The thugs were pounding on the door with their clubs, trying to break in. Since the main mob was moving quickly, those at the door feared being left behind and eventually hurried off to rejoin their group heading toward Ferdowsi Square.
Once we stepped out of that house, I searched everywhere for my cousin, but I couldn't find him. With no other choice, I headed to my aunt's house to check on him. I knocked on the door, and his younger brother opened it. My aunt was pacing back and forth in the courtyard, distraught and consumed by worry.
'Where is Mahmoud?' she cried out the moment she saw me.
I had to lie. 'He went with one of his friends and said he'd be back soon.'
She looked me straight in the eye and asked, 'Are you lying to me?'

'Why would I lie, Auntie?' I replied.
I hurried upstairs, both to wash my hands and to escape any further questioning.
Shortly after, she went outside to look for him, and as fate would have it, Mahmoud arrived and asked his mother where I was.
'Weren't you with Mansour?' she asked.
'I lost him in the middle of the demonstration,' he replied.
My aunt came back inside and looked at me. 'Thank you very much!' she said. 'I didn't expect you of all people to lie to me.'
I apologized to her and said, 'I only wanted to put your mind at ease.'
That night, we called my sister's house in Rasht to check on things. 'Rasht has become incredibly chaotic,' she said. 'Come back if you can.' The next day, we set off for Rasht to see the situation for ourselves. At that time, my mother wasn't in the city, and our paternal home had been rented out to someone else. Consequently, we stayed at my sister Rukhsareh's house for a few days.
I didn't feel comfortable there; I felt like an intruder. My brother Torab, however, was quite carefree and didn't seem to mind how his presence affected others. I tried to go there only to sleep, eating my meals out and even changing my clothes at the dry cleaners to minimize my stay.
Since my sister's husband was into 'smoking' (opium), my brother got along with him quite well; they spent most of their time tucked away in the smoking room. My sister was usually confined to the kitchen. Her husband held rather misogynistic views, so I didn't socialize with him much. Given our significant age gap, I always maintained a respectful distance.
From that day forward, I rarely saw Torab at the demonstrations. He spent most of his time at a bookstore with people he called his friends. It later came to light that the owners of that bookstore were members of the Tudeh Party.

The Shah's Departure from Iran

"The Shah had lost all hope in his puppet governments and was desperate to leave the country. He searched for someone who could save his regime from collapse, eventually appointing Shapour Bakhtiar, a prominent member of the National Front, as Prime Minister. Despite fierce opposition from his own party, Bakhtiar accepted the post in a final, futile attempt to rescue the monarchy. But it was too late; the people had already made up their minds. Bakhtiar ordered the closure of Mehrabad Airport, yet Khomeini told reporters he would return to Tehran shortly. The protests reached a fever pitch. Along with a few others, I went to our local mosque to speak with the prayer leader, Ayatollah Faghihi (whose brother led another mosque). We went to protest his absence from the demonstrations, urging him to join so that more people would be inspired to take to the streets.

His response was curt: 'I am a cleric; I do not involve myself in politics.'

Disheartened, we rose to leave. Just as we reached the door, he called my name. We turned back with a glimmer of hope, thinking he had changed his mind about joining the march.

But he looked at me and said, 'I wish to speak only with you. Tell your friends to leave.' I told them to go on ahead.

He asked me to sit beside him. He placed his hand on my shoulder and spoke softly:

'May God bless your father’s soul. I owe him a great debt; he helped me during my darkest days to become the leader of this mosque, found me a home... I care for you as if you were my own son. Because of that affection, I want to tell you something, but you must promise not to repeat it.'

'I promise,' I replied.

He leaned in and said, 'Take this advice from me: never trust the clergy.'

'Why?' I asked, stunned.

'If there are a hundred bad traits among men,' he said, 'ninety-nine of them reside within us clerics. And that final one? We share that with the rest of you.'

Then, with a faint smile, he added, 'Keep your distance from this lot.'

Though his words disturbed me deeply, I found myself silenced. I quietly stood up and walked toward my friends, who were waiting outside.
From that day on, we held daily demonstrations in our neighborhood and helped distribute kerosene among the people. The fear of SAVAK was fading, and a more spiritual atmosphere was taking hold; people were genuinely looking out for one another.
I remember one of those days, I was handing out Khomeini’s proclamations to shopkeepers in the **Sagharisazan** district. They took them from me, some out of genuine interest and others out of fear. Eventually, I went to the cobbler shop owned by my friend’s father. He had been a close friend of my own father; back when my father took me secretly to Mashhad, he had entrusted this man with our household expenses to deliver to my mother. His son, Ali, was a student at Tehran University, and we hadn't been in touch for a while.
When I handed him the proclamation, he glanced at it, handed it back with disdain, and snapped, 'I won't read anything by this so-and-so. Take it out of here.'
'But you are a man of prayer,' I replied, 'and he is a Marja’ (Source of Emulation).'
'I follow **Ayatollah Khoei**,' he retorted, 'not this "Englishman"!'
Because of his friendship with my father and the fact that I had known him since childhood, I kept my silence and left his shop to continue my task. He was the first person I had ever heard insult Khomeini and call him a British agent, while the common word on the street was that Ayatollah Khoei was the 'Court’s Marja’,' followed mostly by the Pahlavi inner circle and the military.
The next day, my friend Mohammad-Ali and I went back to the shop. 'All universities are closed,' we asked, 'so why hasn't your son Ali returned to Rasht?'
'He’s busy with work and can’t make it back,' the cobbler claimed.
However, one of Ali’s friends later tipped us off that his father was lying—Ali was indeed in Rasht and had been spotted.

To be sure, I went to their house the following day and knocked. His mother opened the door. 'Ali is in the restroom,' she told me. 'Go sit in his room until he comes out; I need to run some errands.' Then she left. Ali had two sisters, the eldest of whom was disabled.

I entered Ali's room and waited. I noticed several books scattered on the floor, and on his small study desk lay the **Resalah** (Manual of Islamic Jurisprudence) of Ayatollah Khomeini, along with a notebook filled with handwritten notes taken from the manual.

I thought to myself: 'The father is anti-Khomeini, yet the son is his devoted follower!'

Until that moment, I hadn't even realized that Khomeini had an official Resalah.

Ali walked in, unaware that I was in his room, and caught me looking at Khomeini's *Resalah*. He scrambled to gather the book and his notes, shoving them into the closet while putting on an act.

'What's the news?' he asked, trying to sound casual.

'The news is with you,' I replied. 'You've just come from Tehran. By the way, when did you get back?'

'About a week ago,' he said.

'Then why haven't we seen you at the protests?'

'You see that my sister is ill and...'

I cut him off. 'She didn't just get sick yesterday. Why weren't you worried about her all that time you were in Tehran?'

He got defensive. 'Did you come here to interrogate me?'

'No,' I said. 'But since I saw that Khomeini is your *Marja*, I wondered why you aren't out there protesting.'

'To hell with Khomeini!' he snapped.

I was stunned. 'Well, are you coming to the demonstration tomorrow or not?'

'Yes,' he answered. But he never came—not once. It seemed he was merely biding his time for the aftermath of the revolution. After the victory, he moved to Tehran, infiltrated the *Komitehs* (Revolutionary Committees), and rose to a position of power. His father, too, became one of Khomeini's most vocal praisers; eventually, no one dared utter even the slightest criticism of Khomeini in his presence.

One day, Bakhtiar announced to reporters that the airport was no longer closed. Khomeini declared he would return to Iran shortly, and the people prepared to welcome him. Word came that his plane would land the next day at Mehrabad Airport.

Early that morning, I set off for Tehran, eager to see for myself the man who promised us liberation from tyranny. The streets were swamped. Traffic was so heavy that I had to get out of the car kilometers away from Shahyad Square. I had never seen such a crowd in my life. As far as the eye could see, the streets were a surging sea of people, moved by a remarkable, spontaneous sense of order. Each person held a flower, waiting to offer it to their leader.

An hour or two passed. One person would say the plane had taken off from France, another would say it hadn't, and a third would announce that it was scheduled to land at a military base before heading straight to Behesht-e Zahra. Upon hearing this, the crowd began moving toward the cemetery—all on foot.

I moved with the tide of the people. I was so lost in the surging waves of the crowd that I barely realized how I even reached Behesht-e Zahra. Once there, as far as the eye could see, there was nothing but a sea of people. There wasn't a single car in sight; in fact, no vehicle could have possibly moved through that mass.

We waited for several hours until word finally reached us that the plane hadn't even departed from France. We had no choice but to trek all the way back to Tehran on foot, and from there, I eventually returned to Rasht.

A few days later, his plane and his entourage finally touched down at Mehrabad Airport. They proceeded to Behesht-e Zahra, where he made a solemn vow to the martyrs of the revolution: that the revolution would ultimately prevail.

The Seizure of Rasht’s SAVAK: Dehumanizing Revenge

"With Khomeini’s arrival in Iran, the confrontation between the people and the regime reached its zenith. The resistance gained a renewed sense of courage and took control of the streets. Following his return, a provisional government was formed, and Bakhtiar’s administration—growing weaker by the day—ordered the release of political prisoners under the pressure of public opinion. His goal was to quell the unrest, but it was too late. He had lost all grip on the situation; his government was powerless, influential only in its rhetoric.

In a final, desperate attempt, he tried a military coup to force people back into their homes. Khomeini, in response, urged the public not to leave the streets. While the army fired upon the crowds, the people responded by throwing flowers. The coup failed; ultimately, the flower triumphed over the bullet.

The spiritual momentum of the revolution drew many military personnel to the people's side. Cities fell one after another, and Rasht was no exception. During those days, the people of Rasht launched a spirited offensive. We successfully besieged Police Station No. 3, which also housed the Criminal Investigation Department. We were negotiating with the chief, promising them that if they surrendered without a fight, no harm would come to them. Everything was proceeding peacefully until a police officer was spotted cycling across the **Zarjoub Bridge** toward the station. The crowd attacked him, dragging him off his bike. As he was being trampled, he pleaded for mercy. The people, moved by compassion, let him go, though they tossed his bicycle into the river.

He ran into the station, only to emerge minutes later with a firearm. He stood in front of the building and opened fire on the crowd to break the siege. Several people were wounded in the chaos. This act of betrayal incited the mob to storm the building, and Police Station No. 3 fell completely into the hands of the people.

News broke that the crowds were surging toward the SAVAK headquarters to liberate their loved ones from underground dungeons. By the time my friend and I arrived, it was already too late; the building had completely fallen to the people.

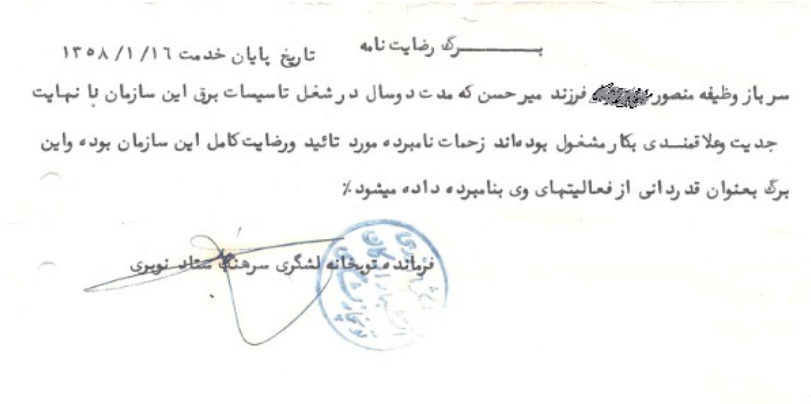
At the main entrance, the mob had hung three or four SAVAK informants upside down. Those who had lost family members to the regime had taken a gruesome revenge; the informants had been killed so brutally that their faces were beyond recognition. I managed to recognize one of them only by his mustache—he was a man who used to frequent Haji Esmail's teahouse under the pretext of selling lottery tickets. He had even threatened me once.
Inside the building, a massive crowd was frantically digging into the floors, hoping to find political prisoners in hidden torture chambers. But no prisoners were ever found.
Police stations, the Governor's office, and most government buildings were now under public control. Along with some local friends, we stationed ourselves at Police Station No. 1, taking over guard duties to maintain security in the streets and alleys. For the first time, the cities were in the hands of the people, and the military had surrendered to the collective will of the nation.

Returning to the Barracks: Preventing a Coup

"Khomeini called upon all deserters to return to their barracks to safeguard against the threat of a counter-coup. With about two months of my service remaining, I decided to return—both to protect the revolution and to officially complete my duty.
I reached the main gate of the **16th Armored Division of Qazvin** around four or five in the afternoon. I asked the military police at the gate, 'Who is the commander of the base now?'
'Brigadier General Motamedi,' he replied.
I looked at him in disbelief. 'Are you joking? The revolution has won, and he is still in command?'
'Yes,' he said.
Distrustful of the situation, I decided not to enter and went to my brother's house to rest for the night.

The next morning, I was jolted awake by the blaring of car horns. I threw open the window. People were shouting that General Motamedi had been attacked by soldiers and non-commissioned officers during the morning formation; he was wounded and rushed to the hospital.
I abandoned my plan to return to Rasht and headed straight back to the barracks. I asked the guard, 'Is it true about the attack on General Motamedi?'
'Yes,' he said, 'he's been badly hurt.'
I entered the base and went to my unit. The clerk and a few soldiers were still there. After the usual greetings, I took the keys to the armory from the clerk. Once inside, I removed the **firing pins** from every single rifle, put them in a bag, and strapped it to my belt. My logic was simple: if anyone raided the armory, the weapons would be useless.
Most commanders lived in the organizational housing within the base, and after the attack on the Division Commander, they were paralyzed by fear. Some worried the revolutionary 'Komitehs' would come for them. Since I couldn't hide the rifles, I neutralized them by removing the pins.
As more soldiers returned to the base each day, I took charge. I hopped onto an **Israeli Jeep** and made rounds to all the units, instructing everyone to remove the firing pins from their weapons, leaving only a limited number functional for essential guard duty.
Commanders who knew me and had heard that the soldiers followed my lead began sending messages, requesting to speak with me. I told them plainly that as long as their hands were not stained with blood, we would support them.
I asked them to choose a representative from among themselves, and Colonel Nobari was selected. I sent a soldier to escort him to our unit and invited the heads of the other units to join us.
Colonel Nobari stated, 'I was an opponent of the Shah and even have a file against me in the Military Counter-Intelligence.'
I told him: 'We want the officers and non-commissioned officers to return to their posts, but with temporary reassignments. The soldiers simply cannot work alongside those who gave orders to suppress the people. Such

proximity could lead to violent clashes. It’s better to relocate these individuals temporarily to let the tension simmer down and allow things to return to a natural rhythm.'
Colonel Nobari turned to the group and asked, 'Do you all agree with this?'
They all replied in unison: 'Private Mansour is our representative.'
It took a few days for these reassignments to be implemented. During this time, several verbal altercations broke out between soldiers and commanders, but fortunately, they were managed and resolved effectively.
I collaborated with the garrison’s representatives, and the unit commanders eventually returned to their duties. In appreciation, many of them thanked me and asked Colonel Nobari to issue my discharge papers, even though I still had about two months of service left.
However, I declined the offer. I stayed in the barracks until my very last day of service; I sensed that such offers might just be a pretext to sideline me and push through their own agendas.
Finally, my military service came to an end. Colonel Nobari had already prepared my discharge papers in advance and handed them to me, accompanied by his heartfelt gratitude.



برگ رضایت نامه تاریخ پایان خدمت ۱۳۵۸/۱/۱۶

سرباز وظیفه منصور [redacted] فرزند میرحسن که مدت دوسال در شغل تاسیسات برق این سازمان با نهایت جدیت وعلاقمندی بکار مشغول بوده‌اند زحمات نامبرده مورد تائید ورضایت کامل این سازمان بوده واین برگ بعنوان قدردانی از فعالیتهای وی بنامبرده داده میشود٪

فرمانده کتابخانه لشگری سرهنگ ستاد نوبری

I said my goodbyes to everyone and headed back to Rasht. My

brother was still living at our sister Rukhsareh's house, so I went to stay with my eldest sister, Simin. In the courtyard of their old family home, they had built a new house designed by the brother of **Khosrow Golsorkhi**. They had moved into the new house and were renting out several rooms in the old one to students; however, since the universities were closed, a couple of rooms were vacant.
I asked my sister to rent one of those rooms to me.
'I have my reputation to consider,' she replied. 'How are you going to live among my tenants? It's a disgrace; what will people say!'
'Our paternal home is still occupied by tenants,' I told her, 'and I don't plan on staying with you for long. I want my independence. Don't worry about your reputation—you don't have to tell anyone you're charging me rent, and I won't mention it either.'
I rented a room from her until our father's house became vacant. I gathered some essentials and lived there for a while. During this period, my friends and I stationed ourselves at Police Station No. 2 to serve the revolution. Gradually, the **Komitehs** (Revolutionary Committees) were falling under the control of the clergy. Each cleric had become the head of the committee in his own neighborhood, and many were now vying for control over other districts. As they grew more powerful, internal rifts began to emerge. Political factions active within the committees began fueling these disputes. Some committees would interfere in the affairs of others, sometimes even arresting and threatening one another's members.
Police officers and criminals who had been in hiding began to resurface, growing beards to blend in as they flocked around the clerics. They slowly infiltrated the committees, seeking to arrest true revolutionaries and exact their own revenge. The revolution was transforming into a counter-revolution. However, they failed to infiltrate the committee where we were stationed, because we knew each other far too well.
At Police Station No. 2, we also undertook meaningful work, such as helping addicts through withdrawal. We provided them with a place to stay, and the local community would

bring them food and clothing to make their recovery easier. It was a healthy environment.
This continued until the Provisional Government decided to put committee members on a payroll, appointing Mr. Lahouti to oversee it. I consulted with my friends. We realized that, until that day, we had worked for the revolution out of our own hearts, doing what we believed was right. If we started receiving a salary, it meant we would have to take orders from those paying us. We would become mere mercenaries.
I told them I intended to leave the committee to do more productive work elsewhere. Mohammad-Ali agreed. Together, we decided to head to the villages to assist the rural population. We went to a village in Foman and built sanitary baths and toilets for several families, but eventually, my financial situation didn't allow me to continue. Most companies were still closed, and I was unemployed with no income. I only had a small amount of savings, which I needed to use to create a source of livelihood for myself.
One day, while walking down Takhti Street in Rasht, I passed an automobile dealership. As I was looking at the cars through the window, someone tapped me on the shoulder and said:
'Cousin, are you lost? What brings you here?'
I turned around and saw my eldest cousin, Amir Agha—the same man who had helped me during one of the hardest moments of my life. I greeted him and asked, 'Cousin, what are you doing here?'
With his usual smile, he replied, 'Your revolution made us unemployed too. Since all the companies are shut down, I've used some savings to start trading cars here.'
Then he asked, 'Were you looking at the cars? Do you want to buy one?'
'Yes,' I said.
'Well, come inside! Why watch from behind the glass?'
He led me into the dealership, pointed to a high-end Mercedes-Benz, and said, 'Take this one. It's a great car; the owner is moving abroad and needs the cash. The price is very low.'
'How much?' I asked.

'32,000 tomans,' he said.
'I only have 18,000 tomans,' I replied, 'and I’m looking for something in that range.'
'Fine,' he said. 'Take this for 30,000. Give me the 18,000 now, and pay the rest whenever you have it.
I thanked him and said, 'I want to stand on my own two feet, not be buried in debt. I need a car that fits my budget.'
He looked at me with a smile. 'I admire that about you—always wanting to be independent.'
We walked toward a **Zhyan** (Citroën Dyane) parked at the back of the shop. A price tag of 19,000 tomans was on it. I asked, 'Is it in good shape? Does it burn oil? I plan to use it as a taxi, and I can't afford repairs if it breaks down.'
'I promise you it’s solid,' he replied with a smile. 'If there’s any issue and you don't want it, bring it back and I’ll give you a full refund.'
I agreed and told him I’d go fetch the money.
'Don't walk,' he said. 'Let’s sign the contract, and you can take the car now.'
He wrote the price as 17,500 tomans.
'Cousin, I didn't ask for a discount,' I protested.
'The car is mine,' he insisted. 'A thousand tomans off because you have 18,000, and another five hundred so you’ll have some cash in your pocket for gas and to start your taxi work.'
I drove the Zhyan to get the money. When I returned, I told him, 'You’re a true gentleman.'
'When I wanted to buy my very first car,' he shared, 'I turned to your father for help. Any time you need assistance, you count on me.'
I thanked him and went on my way to start my new life. From the next day, I spent several hours daily working as a taxi driver. It earned me pocket money and allowed me to help others. Whenever I saw elderly people whom other taxis wouldn't pick up, I’d stop for them. I accepted whatever they could pay; if they had nothing, I drove them for free.
Eventually, the tenant at our paternal home moved out. I moved from my sister’s house back to my father’s house—even though the roof leaked. Mohammad-Ali moved in with me, and we lived there together. Meanwhile, my middle

brother, Torab, was still quite comfortably settled in at our sister Rukhsareh's house!

Power Struggles Among Clerics in Rasht

"The internal rifts among the power-hungry clerics intensified by the day. They would arrest one another, subject each other to harassment, and circulate defamatory night-letters. Rasht was perhaps the only city where Friday prayers were held in three separate locations by three competing imams: Faghihi, Amini, and **Ehsanbakhsh**.
The conflict grew so severe that it was decided Ayatollah **Makarem Shirazi** would intervene to mediate among the three claimants. To welcome him, I, along with a high school literature teacher who was a friend of my older brother and two others, headed to Municipality Square to provide protection during his arrival.
Upon reaching the square, we found that Ehsanbakhsh, Amini, and Faghihi had already gathered with their armed supporters. Each intended to take Ayatollah Makarem to their own home, viewing his visit as a symbolic endorsement of their authority and right to the Friday imamate of Rasht. They knew that if the Ayatollah stayed at one of their residences, it would signify his recognition of them as the official representative of the city.
The atmosphere grew increasingly volatile. To prevent a violent clash, we proposed that Ayatollah Makarem stay at the home of Mr. Faghihi's brother—a man who remained neutral and uninvolved in these political feuds. We requested the three claimants join him there for a private dialogue to resolve the matter peacefully. They reluctantly agreed, realizing that if no decision was reached that night, the situation would spiral out of control.
After welcoming the guests, Mr. Faghihi—the prayer leader of our own mosque—led them into a private room to consult with Ayatollah Makarem. However, barely a few minutes passed before the insults and accusations began to fly. In

the presence of Ayatollah Makarem, they openly accused each other of being **SAVAK** informants.
Two of them alleged that Mr. Ehsanbakhsh had accepted bribes from his students to give them passing grades. They also claimed that whenever the Shah visited Rasht, Ehsanbakhsh was always there to welcome him.
Ehsanbakhsh retorted, 'Among the clergy in Rasht, I was the most prominent; that is why I was taken to welcome the Shah!'.
The exchange became so toxic and insulting that Ayatollah Makarem decided to stay the night and return to Tehran early the next morning. He told them he would announce the outcome of the meeting at a later date."
A few days later, Ayatollah Khomeini appointed Mr. **Lahouti** as his representative in Gilan province. Mr. Lahouti, in turn, announced that during his absence, Mr. **Ehsanbakhsh** would act as his deputy and lead the Friday prayers.
These developments caused me to distance myself from these circles more and more each day. This was especially true after I came across a 'night-letter' from Mr. Amini's supporters, which stated:
'Mr. Amini's knowledge, expertise, and revolutionary struggles far exceed those of Mr. Ehsanbakhsh, and even Mr. Lahouti. We have decided to continue holding Friday prayers under the leadership of Mr. Amini.'
I went with a friend to the **Jameh Mosque of Rasht**, where Mr. Ehsanbakhsh led the prayers. After the service, the youths who had questions began to approach him. Since I could never bring myself to speak in front of a crowd, I handed the night-letter to my friend and asked him to pose the questions.
He said, 'Mansour has a question for you.' Then he turned to me and added, 'Go ahead, ask him yourself.'
Reluctantly, I showed the night-letter to Mr. Ehsanbakhsh and asked for his opinion of Mr. Amini after he had read it. Having read the letter, he remarked:
'A hundred men like Amini aren't worth a single hair on Mr. Lahouti's head.'
At the time, everyone knew that Mr. Lahouti was a supporter of **Abolhassan Banisadr**. I asked Ehsanbakhsh,

'And what is your opinion of Mr. Banisadr?'
He replied with absolute conviction:
'A thousand men like Lahouti aren't worth a single hair on Banisadr’s head. Mr. Banisadr is a scholar, sir!'

Partnering with My Brother and the Rest of the Story

"Gradually, I reduced my involvement with the committees and neighborhood associations. I spent most of my time trying to help people while making a conscious effort to stay outside the circles of power.
One day, I was at my second sister Rukhsareh’s house. A friend of her husband, who was a regular smoker, was sitting around the brazier with the others, busy with his opium. I was sitting beside them, listening to their conversation. When he learned that my brother, Torab, used to do electrical installations for buildings but was now unemployed, he said:
'That’s great! There’s a big project available. If you're interested, you could go to Arak to do it.'
My brother asked about the rates. The guest gave him a figure. Torab, who had comfortably settled into my sister’s home and lost his drive to work, replied with a full stomach and a dismissive tone:
'No, the price is too low. It’s not worth it. I’m not doing it.'
His words deeply frustrated me. After the guest left, I told my brother:
'If you don’t want to do it, I’m ready to take the job and get it done.'
'You have no right to accept a job that I’ve rejected!' he snapped.
'Well, if you aren't going to take it, why won't you let me?' I asked.
'The price isn't right,' he insisted.

'That argument only makes sense if you have multiple job offers and are choosing the best one,' I countered, 'not when you're unemployed and living off others.'
'I've said my piece,' he replied.
I knew my brother simply didn't want to leave the comfort of the opium brazier and wasn't even considering our sister's situation. I spoke with my brother-in-law to put some pressure on him, and finally, Torab agreed.
A few days later, we set off for Arak in my Zhyan to inspect the site. We first went to a guesthouse and rented a room for several months. Then we visited the site. The buildings were being constructed for the employees of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, and we were to handle the electrical installations.
Below our guesthouse room, there was a small grocery store owned by a man named Ali, famously known as 'Ali Esfahani.' We would usually do our daily shopping from him.
On the first day, I began working alongside my brother. He lasted until noon before saying, 'We need to hire a laborer to carve out the channels for the conduits in the walls. We should only handle the installation.' He went off to find someone while I continued alone. This became the pattern. Two days later, he found a young laborer, and from that point on, Torab didn't lift a finger; he spent his time wandering the site looking for companions.
In the center of the site was a small shack where the elderly watchman lived. He would sit by his brazier in the cold, brewing tea. Torab grew close to him, buying him tea and sugar. One day, to 'warm him up,' Torab gave him a small piece of opium. 'Eat this,' he said, 'you'll feel warm and won't notice the cold.' The old man took it and nearly fell ill, but after a glass of tea, he seemed to come back to life. He didn't realize this was the first step toward addiction. Torab knew, but he made the old man dependent anyway.
After a while, a supervising engineer arrived from Tehran for an inspection. I don't know if he was already a smoker, but he quickly befriended Torab and joined him at the brazier. Torab's circle of opium-smoking friends grew by the day. He even brought the brazier and pipe into our guesthouse room, smoking juice (*Shireh*) late into the night.

I worked days with the laborer who had taken Torab's place. Whenever I protested that we had agreed to work together, he'd say, 'The laborer is my replacement; I'm paying him out of my own share.'
'If that's the case,' I told him once, 'I'll hire a laborer too and go off to enjoy myself!'
He just shrugged. 'You were the one who said if I took the job, you'd do the work.'
He was utterly carefree, with no thought for the future. I once asked him, 'What is your greatest wish?'
'To marry a truckload of cigarettes!' he replied—though he really meant opium.
His life had become nothing but smoke. I would return from work exhausted only to find him asleep. Then at night, he'd turn on the radio, light his pipe, and sing along with the performers. I'd tell him, 'Turn it off, I have to work tomorrow.'
He'd just laugh and say, 'Seize the moment!'
The distance between us grew every day. The only person unaware of this gap was him.
One day, a laborer quit after half a day, exhausted. He demanded his wages, but Torab refused. The laborer shouted, 'You have money for opium but won't pay my wages? I won't let you stuff my hard-earned money into your pipe!'
Torab chased after him but couldn't catch him. We watched from the top of the building. One of the workers beside me said, 'Don't go down. Let that young man get what's his. You can't stand up to your brother, but maybe he can.'
He was right. The young man left, but his words stuck in my mind.
The next day, Torab came by acting as if nothing had happened. He had bought Chelo-kebab and said, 'Come, let's have lunch.' I thought he wanted to talk, but no. We just ate, and then he said, 'I couldn't find a laborer. Just keep working on your own for a few more days.' That was the moment I realized there was no hope for him to change.
At night, the sound of his singing and the smell of opium filled the room. I couldn't take it anymore. The old watchman made a bitter joke: 'The story of you and your brother has become the tale of the donkey doing the work

while the horse does the eating!' He was right. Everyone had figured it out; I was the only one left hoping things might change.

Iraq's cowardly invasion of Iran had begun, and people were fleeing war zones for other cities in droves. Some had come to Arak and taken rooms in the same guesthouse where we stayed. Every morning, I'd see their young men waking up, grooming their hair, and loitering in front of the guesthouse to harass local girls—while young men from other cities were heading to Khuzestan to defend the motherland. I found this sight unbearable. I thought to myself, 'How can some flee their own birthplace while others go to defend it?' Their men, too, seemed interested only in their own pleasures, as if nothing were happening to their country. Meanwhile, my sister Esmat was living in Ahvaz, and I was deeply worried about her. I wanted to finish the job as quickly as possible and get to Ahvaz to help them.

It was summer, and the air in Arak was sweltering. Ali Esfahani had placed a barrel of water in front of his shop to quench the thirst of passersby. There was another water barrel inside our worksite, in the corner of the watchman's shack. Ali Esfahani also sold blocks of ice. I made an arrangement with him to drop two blocks of ice into the barrel in front of his shop daily on my account, and to set aside two more for me to take to the worksite barrel, so the workers could have cold water and perhaps offer a prayer for my deceased loved ones.

He told me, 'If you want ice every day, you must pay for a week in advance.' So, most Fridays, I'd go to his shop, buy my toiletries, and pay for the week's ice. Sometimes his son would mind the shop while Ali went out for supplies. One day, I asked his son, 'Are you from Isfahan?' He laughed and said, 'No.' I asked, 'Then why do they call your father Ali Esfahani?' Pointing to the sign above his head—which showed a thin man and a fat man labeled *The Fate of Cash vs. Credit Sales*—he said, 'No one has ever managed to buy from my father on credit. That's why they call him Isfahani.'

I gradually became friends with his son. He was quite vain and kept telling everyone, 'I'm very handsome.' A few times I told him, 'Be grateful for your looks, but it's not good to

keep telling people you're the best-looking of all.'
Eventually, his brother-in-law said he wanted to go to Tehran to bring his wife (the boy's sister) back to Arak. He asked the boy, 'I'm alone, come with me.' The boy agreed and they set off. They had an accident on the road, and the windshield shattered into his face. For several months, the poor guy didn't even dare to step out of the house...
One day, the son of the guesthouse owner said to me, 'We're going to a relative's watermelon patch this Friday to pick some.' He asked me to join them, and I agreed.
The day before, I told my brother, 'I need my car on Friday; I'm going out of town with my friends.' He said, 'Fine.' But when I woke up, the car was nowhere to be found. I waited for my brother at the guesthouse office so we could take the car to the patch, but no matter how long we waited, he didn't show up.
I told my friends, 'I think my brother might be at the worksite. Let's take a taxi there.' When we arrived, there was no sign of either the car or my brother. I went to the watchman's shack and saw the supervising engineer sitting there with two others. I asked them, 'Any news of my brother?' The watchman said, 'Your brother went out and said he'd be back soon.'
A few minutes later, my brother drove into the worksite. He looked annoyed to see us. I told him, 'I told you beforehand that I needed the car.' He replied, 'Fine, take it and go. I'll stay here with my friends until you get back because I need the car later.' I said, 'Alright.'
My friends and I set off for the watermelon patch. We picked some, loaded them into the trunk, and headed back. On the way, we were pulled over in front of a Gendarmerie outpost. They asked where we had been and where we were going. They told me to pop the hood. I said okay. While one of the gendarmes was inspecting the front, two of my friends approached him with a watermelon and said, 'It's hot, come have some.' Since we were young and didn't look like troublemakers, the gendarmes let the inspection slide. They took one of the watermelons and said, 'Go on and enjoy yourselves.'
We returned to the guesthouse to drop off the watermelons before I had to get the car back to my brother. I asked one

of my friends, 'Come with me so I’m not alone.' He hopped in, and we headed toward the worksite.
When we arrived, before I had even come to a full stop, my brother dashed out of the watchman’s shack barefoot. 'Hurry! Pop the hood!' he shouted. I pulled the release cable. He reached in, disconnected the heater’s flexible air duct, pulled out a rolled-up cloth package, and exhaled, 'Thank God!' He hadn't even noticed my friend sitting right next to me.
The two of us were frozen in shock. We couldn't believe he had stashed opium inside the car’s heater duct. On the drive back, my friend said:
'Someone probably tipped them off, which is why the gendarmes singled our car out. We only escaped trouble by joking around and handing over those watermelons. If they had found that opium, we’d all be in prison—and in the smugglers' ward at that! The car title is in your name; how would you have proven it wasn't yours?'
I apologized profusely and begged him not to tell anyone. He promised, but added:
'I’m never getting in your car again.'
The next day, I confronted my brother, filled with resentment. 'Why did you do this? You’ve put my reputation at stake.'
'It was your fault!' he snapped. 'You rushed me at the worksite, and I forgot to take the package out.'
'How much was it, anyway?' I asked.
'Not much,' he said, 'just a small roll.'
But I knew he was lying; the package was far larger than a 'small roll.'
As the days passed, he sank deeper into this quagmire. He tried relentlessly to drag me down with him. My nerves were becoming increasingly frayed, but I didn't want to get into a physical fight with him. Whenever he smoked opium in the watchman’s shack, he’d end up sleeping there. Early in the morning, when I’d arrive at the worksite, I’d see him covered in the ashes of the brazier. As I brushed the ash off him, he’d ask:
'While I was away from the guesthouse these past couple of days, did anyone ask for me?'
'So-and-so and so-and-so asked where you were.'

'See?' he'd say happily. 'Everyone loves me. You don't have anyone looking for you!'
I'd tell him, 'The first thing they ask me is whether you'll lend them your pipe or not! They aren't looking for you; they're looking for your brazier!' I'd add, 'Just stop smoking for a week and see if anyone remembers you.'
But the next day, high again, he'd just joke around with me. It was impossible to tell when he was high and when he was coming down.
Winter arrived in Arak. It didn't snow much, but the cold was bone-chilling. The electrical conduits in the yard were so frozen that they would stick to my skin when I picked them up. Yet, I had to push through to save enough for a few months and remain independent. I kept thinking, *'I wish I had never partnered with my brother. This has been a bitter lesson.'* Everyone around me warned, 'Leave him and move on with your life before he drags you down with him.'
One day, a friend whose father owned a carpentry shop said, 'My father won't be in tomorrow; come hang out at the shop.' I went. There was a 20-centimeter piece of patterned wood on the bench. I picked it up and began carving it with a knife. Suddenly, his father walked in.
'Why are you splintering that wood?' he barked.
'It was nothing special,' I replied. 'I'll sweep the floor myself.'
He paused, then said more gently, 'It doesn't matter now.'
'It matters to me,' I said. 'How much does this wood cost per meter?'
When he told me the price, I was shocked. 'That's incredibly expensive!' I told him right then that I would build a duplicating machine to carve those patterns.
He scoffed, 'If you could do that, you'd be a millionaire. But you can't. This machine comes from Italy and it's computerized!'
'Once I set my mind to something,' I replied, 'I don't stop fighting until I win.' That idea stuck in my mind...
One night, while I was asleep, I sensed the smell of smoke. I woke up to find the room filled with it, despite the freezing cold. I immediately threw open the doors and windows to let the smoke out.
My brother, still with his eyes closed, protested, 'Close the

window, I’m freezing!'
'Get up!' I shouted. 'Your mattress is on fire!'
He woke up in a panic and, seeing the smoke, bolted from the room. He was so terrified that he didn't even dare come back inside to help me.
I saw the mattress smoldering. The only thing I could do was heave it out of the guesthouse window onto the sidewalk in front of Ali Esfahani’s shop.
We ran downstairs to put it out. With the help of the guesthouse owner's son, who was my friend, we doused it with water. It turned out my dear brother had fallen asleep with a lit cigarette in his hand, which dropped onto the mattress and started the fire.
If I hadn't been a light sleeper, we both would have suffocated. The entire guesthouse might have gone up in flames, and innocent lives could have been lost to my brother’s negligence. It made no difference to him, though; he was so high he didn't even realize what had happened.
From that day on, I simply could not bear living with him anymore. I was constantly under the scrutiny and reproach of others; some even assumed that I, too, was using opium with him. I felt myself losing control, yet I didn't want a direct confrontation—after all, he was still my brother. But I could feel a growing aggression within me. I was becoming afraid of my own shadow because everyone kept praising my 'incredible patience,' and I feared the day that patience would snap, leading me to do something I could never undo.
I searched every day for a way out, for a way to save myself. I poured all that nervous energy into my work, accelerating the pace. I would only return to the guesthouse for a few hours of fitful sleep. I had neither proper rest nor decent meals; my only obsession was finishing the job.
With just a few days left until the main work was done, I saw even less of my brother. The supervising engineer had rented a small house in the city of Arak, and apparently, my brother had spent the last few days there, anchored to the opium brazier. His other 'friends'—having seen no sign of him—kept coming to the guesthouse asking for his whereabouts. When I told them I had no idea, they would simply ask if they could borrow his pipe!

One day, I went to the watchman’s shack to have my lunch. I noticed that the old guard, who was usually bustling about, was nodding off.
'What’s wrong?' I asked. 'Are you unwell? Should I take you to a doctor?'
'Don't worry,' he replied. 'My medicine is with the Engineer.' He meant my brother.
A wave of bitterness washed over me. I thought to myself, 'My ruthless brother didn't even spare this old man. Did he even consider what this poor guard will do with his addiction once the construction is finished and we leave Arak? Who will pay for his opium then?' But mid-thought, I snapped at myself: 'Forget the guard; worry about yourself before you're the one who’s destroyed.'
Just then, the door to the shack swung open. My brother walked in with the Supervising Engineer. It looked as though they had just risen from the brazier—as usual, they hadn't even bothered to brush the gray ash out of their hair. I stood up, shook their hands, and brushed the coal ash off my brother’s head with my own hand.
'If you have a moment, I need to talk to you,' I said quietly.
The supervising engineer knew, and I knew as well, that they had just come from the opium brazier. To create a diversion, he said to me, 'What a great car you have! Whenever you decide to sell it, I’m your buyer.'
'Sure, definitely,' I replied.
Then I turned back to my brother. 'Do you have time?'
'What is it?' he snapped. 'Just say it here.'
'No, not here. Somewhere else.'
'I’m busy,' he insisted.
'Are you really so busy that you can't spare half an hour to talk to me?'
He laughed dismissively. 'You can see for yourself—if I had time, I would’ve at least brushed the ash off my head!' Still laughing, he added, 'I bet you want to give me another lecture.'
'No,' I said. 'We are well past the point of lectures.'
'I’ll come to the guesthouse on Friday afternoon,' he finally agreed.
On Friday morning, I went down to the guesthouse office and had breakfast with the owner's son, who was my friend.

After we chatted for a bit, I told him, 'I’m going to the bathhouse.'
I went to Ali Esfahani’s shop to buy some shampoo. I took out the money to pay him, but to my surprise, he pushed it back.
'It’s on the house,' he said.
'Are you joking?' I asked. 'Ali Agha, I took the shampoo and I must pay for it. I also need to pay for the ice.'
'Pay me later,' he said simply.
'What difference does it make? I don't like being in debt to anyone.'
He insisted again, 'It’s on me. I don't want your money. And if you ever find yourself needing cash, just let me know.'
I looked at him in disbelief, walked out of the shop, and headed back to the guesthouse office. I told the story to the owner's son.
He was stunned. 'Ali Esfahani has been our neighbor for nearly fifteen years,' he said. 'His son is my best friend. To this day, he has never given anyone so much as a piece of gum on credit! See how much he respects you that he won't take your money.
I said goodbye to him and walked toward the bathhouse, which was about a hundred to a hundred and fifty meters from the guesthouse. As I walked, I kept wondering: what had happened to make Ali Esfahani refuse my money? Did he realize how much my brother was tormenting me? Was he trying to tell me, 'I’ve got your back, you can count on me'?
After my bath, I strolled back toward the guesthouse, still lost in thought. From a distance, I noticed a crowd gathered in front of Ali Esfahani’s shop. I quickened my pace, pushed through the people, and reached the storefront. To my utter shock, I saw Ali Esfahani slumped in his chair—he had passed away.
A heavy sadness washed over me as the ambulance arrived and took him away. I went to the guesthouse office to see my friend. 'I think Ali Esfahani had a premonition that he was going to die,' I told him. 'That’s why he suddenly became so generous and wouldn't take my money.'

Escaping from My Brother, Torab

"I was deeply disheartened. In the midst of all that commotion, my brother walked into the guesthouse office. We had a cup of tea and then went up to our room. It seemed he, too, realized I wasn't in a good state and had reached my breaking point.
'I want to talk to you for ten minutes,' I said calmly, 'and I hope this conversation ends on good terms.'
I began by explaining that my work would be finished in a few days and that I had remained loyal to my commitment, bringing the project to this stage. I told him we couldn't do much more for now; we had to wait a month or two for the plasterers to finish the buildings before we could handle the easier, high-profit tasks like installing switches and outlets. Essentially, we would be idle for at least a couple of months. I told him plainly that I didn't want to stay there and had no intention of returning to finish the job.
I made him a proposal: 'Let’s settle the accounts for the work done up to today, and one of us can take over the rest. I simply no longer have the strength to continue this partnership with you. You know well that I’ve done all the grueling, low-pay labor, and only the easy, high-profit work remains. If you want, you can finish it with a laborer; otherwise, I’ll do it alone. The choice is yours.'
'I know you’ve struggled a lot,' he said. 'From now on, I’ll try to be by your side more, and we’ll finish the rest together.'
'I don't see the strength in myself to continue with you,' I replied. 'Our brotherhood is more important to me than money. I believe that if we put some distance between us, our bond as brothers might actually grow stronger.'
'If you think that’s better,' he said, 'then fine—go.'
'Then please,' I added, 'let’s settle the accounts for my labor as soon as possible.'
He was secretly pleased that I had done the hard, low-wage work and left the easy, lucrative part for him, but he was

worried about what others would say and the fact that he was losing access to my car.
As he began calculating the accounts, he tried to 'prove' his brotherhood to me—he nearly charged me for his opium expenses! He even billed me for the burnt mattress, arguing, 'You were the one who threw the mattress out of the room!'
'Fine,' I said. 'Whatever you say.'
He continued, 'Since you're the one leaving and I'll have to cover the guesthouse rent from now on, I'm deducting half of that rent from your share.'
'You don't even need the guesthouse,' I countered. 'You spend your nights either at your friend's place or sleeping in the watchman's shack. Besides, you could easily swap the double room for a single.'
But he wouldn't budge. 'We took this room together from day one,' he insisted, 'and I intend to keep it.'
'Settle it however you like,' I said, 'just please, finish the accounting so I can be on my way.'
He calculated the figures exactly how an addict settles accounts with his family to get money for his next fix; with utter audacity, he even asked me to leave my car for him, promising to pay me once he finished his work in Arak. I refused. Had I agreed, he surely would have deducted his future gas money from my share in advance.
When he finally stated my portion, I think even he felt a flicker of shame, for my earnings were less than that of a simple laborer. But it didn't matter to me. I was being liberated from the hell he had built for me.
After settling the accounts, I spent a few more days with my friends in Arak, but I didn't see my brother; he never returned to the guesthouse. I went to the worksite to say my goodbyes. The watchman told me he hadn't seen him for two days. I gave the watchman some money and told him, 'Save yourself before it's too late.'
'It's too late for me,' he replied, 'but I'm glad you saved yourself.'
I said my farewells and didn't look back. I had found good friends in Arak whom I was now leaving behind.
Later, I discovered that during the time he used my car, he had been collecting a significant monthly allowance from

the company for fuel and vehicle usage to buy supplies—money he never shared with me. All the while, I had been paying for the gas and maintenance out of my own pocket.
I reached Tehran with the intention of going to Rasht, but halfway there, I changed my mind and headed toward Ahvaz instead. I went to my sister's house, but they had moved to a new complex of company housing provided by the National Oil Company. I stayed there for a few days. Iraq had launched a massive new offensive, and their forces had reached the outskirts of Ahvaz. Saddam Hussein was determined to settle the occupation of Khuzestan once and for all. I will never forget the television anchor broadcasting the news about the heavy bombardment around Ahvaz. He suddenly cut the report short and disappeared from the screen. We were certain the TV station had been struck. A few minutes later, he returned and said: 'Do not be afraid; the city is not under direct threat. These explosions are from the military's ammunition depots around the city, which detonated after being hit by enemy artillery.'
Still, we felt as though the city could fall at any moment. I began digging a trench in my sister's courtyard so they would have some cover during an attack. The situation grew more perilous by the day. I wanted to head to the front lines to help, but I couldn't leave my sister and her children unprotected. My brother-in-law's job made it impossible for him to always be there for them; he was in charge of extinguishing oil well fires, and since the wells were being attacked daily, he had to travel to various cities across Khuzestan to put them out.
He was deeply worried about his family, especially since he saw that I couldn't stand being idle and might head to the front at any moment, risking my life. For this reason, he asked me to take his wife and children to Rasht. At that point, Iraqi planes hadn't yet attacked Rasht. I agreed, thinking that if the women and children were safe and away from us, we could defend ourselves more effectively.
So, we decided to leave for Rasht. The next day, while Iraqi television was showing their forces nearing Ahvaz and claiming they controlled the main roads, we set out. Our plan was to first reach the home of one of my brother-in-law's relatives in a village near Ahvaz. On the roads, we saw

the desperate state of people fleeing—some were even clinging to moving trains, risking everything to save themselves and their families.

Despite all the hardships, we finally reached the home of my brother-in-law's relatives. We stayed there for a few hours until the intensity of the Iraqi attacks subsided a bit, and then we set off toward Rasht. Once we arrived, the immediate danger to my sister and her children was over; Rasht was in total peace. I left them at my eldest sister Simin’s house and headed to Tehran the next day to catch a bus back to Ahvaz.

However, I found that there were no buses available for Ahvaz, as all of them had been requisitioned for the mobilization of volunteer forces to the front lines. One of the drivers, seeing how distressed I was, said, 'Go talk to those heading to the front by bus; maybe they can find a spot for you.' I approached several coordinators, and fortunately, one of the men in charge of a group of young volunteers agreed to let me on.

I boarded the bus full of fighters and we headed toward Ahvaz. Up until that point, most of the passengers had never seen combat and had no real concept of war. As the bus started moving, they began chanting slogans: 'We are men of war!'

Around 4:00 or 4:30 AM, our bus entered the city of **Dezful**. Suddenly, a massive explosion shook the entire vehicle. Simultaneously, the blaring sirens of ambulances racing toward the blast site and the subsequent cries and wails of the people filled the city air. Thick smoke mixed with dust had turned the sky dark. The driver, trembling with fear, moved forward very slowly until we reached the site of the incident, where a large crowd had gathered, desperately trying to help the wounded.

This scene was a wake-up call for many of the passengers; for the first time, they realized what war truly meant. You could see the raw fear etched on their faces. Some insisted we get off to help. The group leader turned to his men and said, 'We will get off, but on one condition: everyone must gather back here at exactly 6:00 AM so we can move out.' Everyone agreed and stepped off the bus.

The destruction was immense, and there was little we could do. An Iraqi missile had struck the very heart of the city while everyone was asleep. It had carved out a massive crater, and many houses and their inhabitants were buried within it.
We felt utterly helpless. At the appointed hour, I returned to the meeting spot and waited for the others. Some of the passengers never showed up; it seemed that after witnessing the horror, they had lost their nerve for the front and had headed back home instead.
The rest of us continued toward Ahvaz. Upon arrival, I went to my brother-in-law's house. He was relieved to see me, and I stayed there for a few days. I would spend the days cooking, and when he returned from work, we would eat together.

Participating in the War with Iraq

One day, I heard that the **16th Armored Division of Qazvin**—the very unit where I had served—was stationed in

Khuzestan. After some inquiries, I located their position on the outskirts of Ahvaz. With great difficulty, I managed to enter their camp. I recognized several non-commissioned officers from my service days, including **Sergeant Ghaffari**. He was the same man who had once reported me to the Second Bureau, accusing me of being anti-Pahlavi. Now, he had grown a beard and reinvented himself as a die-hard 'Hezbollahi' within the army; many of the officers were actually afraid of him.

He approached me, gave me a warm embrace, and introduced me to others. We had lunch together and discussed the situation at the front. Rumors were circulating that the incompetence of President **Banisadr** had led to heavy casualties within the 16th Division. But the men there told me these were lies. They were on the front lines, they were fighting, and they knew the truth.

They recounted how they had attacked Iraqi positions, forced a retreat, and reclaimed lost ground. The plan was for support forces to secure the rear so that after reorganization, a new offensive could begin. During this interval, the President went to Tehran to coordinate the next phase at the Military Headquarters. Suddenly, an order for an immediate attack was issued—without support or proper preparation. This forced offensive ended in failure, leading to a retreat, the loss of previously gained positions, and the martyrdom of one-third of our personnel. It later surfaced that the **Representative of the Imam** had ordered the attack without informing Banisadr, who was the Commander-in-Chief. Years later, seeking the truth, I questioned Mr. Banisadr himself. He explained that the clerics were putting immense pressure on the military, claiming the army was stalling, even though an offensive required ammunition, weapons, and logistical support that took time to deploy. The attack proceeded without sufficient supplies. While initially successful, the Iraqi Republican Guard launched a counter-attack in the afternoon. Combined with psychological warfare from the rear and a lack of ammunition, morale crumbled, and soldiers began to turn back.

It was an epic scene: the President and Commander-in-Chief stood directly in front of the lead truck, joined by a few brave, weeping officers. When the retreating soldiers realized they would have to drive over their own Commander-in-Chief, they too broke down in tears and returned to the front. The Iranian forces did not lose the positions entirely; they dug in at **Karkheh Kur**, but the cost in lives and equipment was devastating. I wrote to Khomeini about the incident, and he reprimanded those responsible for the psychological warfare, telling them to stop interfering with the army's operations.

Sergeant Ghaffari, assuming I had become a high-ranking 'Hezbollahi' myself, leaned in and said, 'I always blamed myself for not listening to you back then. I've only just realized what a great man Imam Khomeini is.'

I looked at him with a smirk and replied, 'You're still making a mistake.'

Taken aback by a response he never expected, he looked deeply unsettled. I joked to ease the tension: 'No need to report me to the higher-ups; I just wanted to see how loyal you truly are to Mr. Khomeini.'

In reality, for men like Ghaffari, there was no difference between the Shah and Khomeini. He was a servant of power, and he drew his own sense of strength from that very servitude.

I told him, 'I want to join you and fight against Iraq.'

'You can't do that within the army,' he said, 'but you can head to Abadan and fight alongside the irregular volunteer forces.'

I said my goodbyes and returned to my sister's house. The next day, without informing my brother-in-law, I set off for Abadan to aid the resistance in the liberation of Khorramshahr. Khorramshahr was under Iraqi occupation, and parts of the main road from Ahvaz to Abadan were also seized. I took a taxi toward the Abadan road and continued in a vehicle as far as the road was deemed safe. Eventually, I reached a point where the main highway to Abadan was blocked because the Iraqis held the territory ahead. The driver stopped and said, 'We can't go any further than this.' I thanked him and got out. I walked past rows of cars filled with people anxious for their relatives until I reached a

checkpoint. I told one of the officers, 'I want to go to Abadan.'
He laughed and said, 'Are you out of your mind? Don't you see everyone is fleeing?'
'I see it,' I replied, 'and that is exactly why I want to go to Abadan—to defend my country.'
'I can't help you,' he said. 'No driver has the courage to go any further.'
I waited there, hoping for a miracle. A few minutes later, a man arrived in a panic and told the checkpoint officers, 'I must get to Abadan at any cost; my family is trapped there and I have to bring them out.' When the officer refused him permission, the man shouted, 'You can't stop me!' He swerved the steering wheel onto the dirt shoulder and sped off into the unknown.
I stepped in front of his car and asked him to take me along. He was relieved and said, 'Hop in!' For several kilometers, we heard nothing but the roar of explosions. The driver, trembling with fear, swerved left and right, driving in a zigzag pattern. Death was the only thing on our minds. I saw overturned vehicles along the road and people fleeing on foot, abandoning their belongings in the middle of the path out of sheer exhaustion.
The further we went, the clearer it became that we were approaching the front lines. The road had been shelled; several trucks and cars lay flipped over. One truck carrying cattle had been struck by a mortar or missile, and the remains of the animals were scattered far and wide. The driver knew the terrain well. I asked him, 'Why don't you drive faster?'
'Because this is a dirt road,' he replied. 'If I go any faster, the dust kicking up behind us will alert the Iraqis, and they'll open fire on us.'
After traversing such a perilous path, we finally reached **Abadan**. He asked, 'Where do you want to go?'
'Somewhere I can help the fighters,' I said.
He introduced me to one of the local volunteers guarding the neighborhood. I said my goodbyes and got out as he went to find his family. The local guard called in on his radio, and shortly after, two fighters arrived in a vehicle

and took me to their base at the **Pirooz Mosque**. They introduced me to their commander.
'Why have you come to a war zone?' the commander asked. 'Don't you know the city is under siege and everyone is fleeing?'
'I know,' I replied. 'That is exactly why I came—to help you.'
He smiled, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said, 'Thank you, brother, for heeding Imam Khomeini's call.'
'It is my duty to defend my country,' I told him.
'You can stay here at our headquarters and assist the brothers,' he suggested.
'I've completed my military service,' I said firmly. 'I want to go to the front lines.'
'Unfortunately,' he replied, 'we cannot issue you a weapon yet, as we do not know you.'
I felt deeply discouraged. 'First, I went to the 16th Armored Division of Qazvin,' I told him, 'and they were the ones who directed me to report to you.'
'Don't take it personally,' he replied. 'We've had many instances where people came to "help," only to be outed later as *Mujahedin-e Khalq* (MKO) infiltrators sent for espionage. That's why we require everyone to bring a verification letter from their local neighborhood association. You can stay with us in the mosque tonight and head back to Ahvaz tomorrow; it's getting late, and the Iraqi shelling is about to begin.'
No matter how much I insisted, he wouldn't budge. 'I've taken my life in my hands to offer it to my country,' I protested. 'Why are you standing in my way?'
'It's just a matter of a few days,' he said. 'Go, get the verification, and come back.'
As night fell, the Iraqi flares began to light up the sky. Our forces were waiting for total darkness to launch small-unit hit-and-run attacks. Everyone gathered inside the mosque; a large number of them were just boys, between twelve and fourteen years old. I thought to myself: 'If they're telling me I need a local permit, how did these kids get to the front? Are they sending me on a wild goose chase, or is there something else...?'
A few minutes later, one of the boys gave the call to prayer (Adhan). I performed my ablutions and joined them in

prayer. Afterward, someone began reciting supplications, followed by elegies (*Noheh*) and chest-beating. The atmosphere grew intensely emotional. One of the fighters announced: 'Tonight, we strike at the heart of the enemy. Brothers who wish to join this assault, please stand up.'
What a night that was! I had once attended a Dervish ceremony in a *Khanqah* and seen how they worked themselves into a spiritual trance—heads swaying uncontrollably until some collapsed. But this was different. It seemed some knew exactly what was coming, while many others were caught up in the fervor.
As the emotions peaked, the commanders stood up one by one, raising their hands in allegiance to the reciter. Then the younger ones rose, grabbing their commanders' hands, pleading with them to sit down and let the youth go instead. 'If you are martyred,' they argued, 'the infidel Saddam will rejoice. If you stay alive, you can train many more like us to fight.' Then another would stand, holding someone else's hand, saying, 'As long as we are alive, we won't let you reach martyrdom before us.'
In the end, those who had initially volunteered sat back down, and a different group was selected for the mission. They were separated from us and taken to another room to receive the necessary briefing for a successful operation. The rest continued the mourning rituals, building their resolve as they waited for their turn in the next mission.
It was 1:30 AM. Those selected for the operation moved into the mosque’s courtyard and then set out toward the objective in small groups. The remaining men—some assigned to guard the city—headed to their posts, while the rest lay down on the ground, waiting in suspense for the outcome of the assault.
I lay down beside one of the boys and asked, 'How long have you been here? Where are you from?' Suddenly, flares lit up the sky, and moments later, the roar of heavy shelling and mortar fire began. Then, abruptly, the firing ceased. In the following silence, the distant barking of stray dogs echoed through the air—it was a vicious sound, as if they were fighting over something they were devouring.
A haunting silence fell over the mosque. I whispered to the boy next to me, 'What do you think happened?'

'The silence means the operation is over,' he replied. 'The flares mean the Iraqis are scanning the area to see if anyone is left alive. Our brothers don't use flares for an assault. And the dogs... their barking means they've found the remains scattered by the blasts; they are fighting over the bodies.'

'What about the wounded and the fallen?' I asked.

'Nothing can be done until dawn,' he said. 'The site has been compromised and is under heavy surveillance. In a couple of hours, they might send a team to recover the wounded—if anyone is still breathing. Those with severe injuries are usually given a *coup de grâce*, and the rest are taken prisoner.'

As the first light of dawn broke, one of the guards spotted a stray dog with a human arm in its mouth—the severed arm of one of our fighters. He chased the dog, managed to retrieve the limb, and brought it back to the mosque. What a night that was! I have never been able to forget it.

It was not destined for me to defend my country there. Early that morning, a fighter came for me, saying he was ordered to escort me back to the checkpoint so I could return to Ahvaz. The main road was still held by the Iraqis. Along the dirt path, the carcasses of animals and the charred remains of blown-up vehicles were still visible everywhere.

We reached the checkpoint. I said my goodbyes and headed back to my sister's house in Ahvaz. My brother-in-law opened the door, relieved to see me still alive, though he reproached me deeply for heading to the front without telling him. 'Don't worry,' I said. 'I'm going to Rasht to get a verification letter from the local neighborhood association so I can return to the front properly.' He was just glad I was leaving for Rasht, knowing I would be safe.

The next day, I set off for Tehran with his younger brother, who was heading to Qum to begin his clerical studies. He got off in Qum, and I continued to Tehran and then to Rasht. I spoke with my friends, Mohammad-Ali and others, about going to the local association together to get the necessary clearance for the war.

The association told us that we first had to cooperate with them before they could issue any verification. In plain

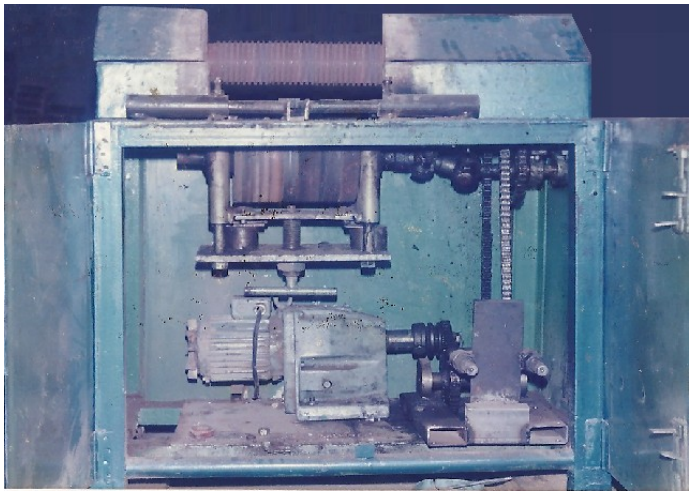
terms, we were expected to act as informants for a while and turn people in just to earn our clearance. That was the turning point; we decided then and there to give up on the idea of heading back to the front.
Despite my lingering desire to serve my country, I rested for a few days and managed to put the thought of the war behind me. Having withdrawn from the idea of the front, I turned my attention to a different path.

Manufacturing Iran’s First Decorative Molding Press

"I told myself I could serve my country through a different path. It was then that the idea of building a decorative molding press took hold—a concept that grew stronger in my mind every day. I began sketching my designs and got straight to work.
First, I went to the market to gather information from molding sellers, wanting to verify what my friend’s father in Arak had told me. I needed to know if such a machine was already being manufactured in Iran or not. At that time, the government had a directive offering interest-free loans to unemployed diploma holders who presented viable executive plans. My friend Mohammad-Ali and a few others had already used this to submit a cabinetry project and set up a workshop.
After researching molding factories in Rasht, I noted down their addresses and pricing. To understand how my design differed from existing machinery, I visited one of the factories with a friend. We told the owner, 'We are a group of unemployed graduates looking to present a project to the government to meet one of the country's industrial needs. Since we have some technical background, we wanted to

know what challenges you face in production. Perhaps we can help.'
The owner was pleased and took us to his office. He brought out a broken mold and said, 'Our biggest headache is these molds breaking. They are incredibly expensive and have to be imported from Italy. Each centimeter of a mold costs nearly a thousand dollars. No one in Iran can repair them because they are made of cast iron, which can't be re-carved. If you could fix these, it would be a massive help.'
'Is it really worth spending that much on molds?' I asked. 'What about the cost of the machine itself?'
He laughed. 'The machine isn't the issue; the molds are everything.'
Despite our persistence, he wouldn't let us see the actual machine. The next day, we visited a second workshop owned by three partners who had each invested one million tomans. One of them, a mechanical engineer and the plant manager, was initially reluctant, but after we insisted, he granted us just ten minutes to see the machine up close.
'I'd be satisfied with five!' I replied.
We entered the workshop. With a quick glance, I realized that the existing machine wasn't much different from the design I had drafted. We were overjoyed and said our goodbyes.
After that, whenever I spoke about building the machine, people would mock me, saying:
'Stop dreaming! The ceiling might collapse from such a big lie!'
But instead of being discouraged, my motivation only grew. I knew a monumental task lay ahead.
First, I bought some plaster, made circular molds, and designed floral patterns around them. I began carving to create the negative mold for casting. However, because the foundryman lacked experience, the molds kept cracking one by one as the molten cast iron was poured. He said, 'You need specialized casting sand for this, not plaster.' I then tried dental molding compound to create a three-piece mold, but that failed too. I went back and forth so many times that the foundryman finally said, 'I'll do whatever you say!'

I experimented with several models without success until I thought of using paraffin wax for the molds. I crafted the wax model, packed casting sand around it, and then melted the paraffin out with heat. This time, when we poured the molten iron, about 70% of the patterns came out perfectly. It was a partial success.
But the next hurdle was being broke.
An acquaintance, seeing my hard work, suggested I contact **Jihad-e Sazandegi** (the Reconstruction Jihad).
'I want to do this on my own, without outside help,' I said.
'Jihad only providing financial support,' he insisted. 'You can pay it back later.'
Eventually, I agreed. Two days later, he told me he had spoken to his contact there and they were eager to collaborate. 'Go to the Jihad office tomorrow,' he told me.
The next day, I went. A man with only three fingers on one hand gave me a warm handshake and introduced himself as the Deputy of Jihad. He placed his hand on my shoulder and said he wanted to see the machine in person. We hopped into a Jihad jeep and drove toward my house. We made a brief stop at **Farhang Square**. A few unemployed graduates were there selling cigarettes. The Deputy looked at them, then put his hand on my shoulder again and said: 'Look! These young men could be serving the revolution, but they spend their time here. Yet you are striving to build your country. Well done!'
When we reached my house, I pulled the cloth off the machine and explained how it operated...



He was delighted and promised his full support. 'Soon, I will return with a cameraman to film your machine,' he said. 'We'll broadcast it on the provincial news so the people can see how Imam Khomeini's leadership inspires young men like you to strive for national self-sufficiency, and others will be encouraged as well...'
'I'm not fond of all that fanfare,' I replied. 'The machine isn't finished yet; it's incomplete. All I ask from you is a workspace and a small loan so I can finalize the construction.'
'Of course,' he said. 'Let's go now; I'll show you a place. If you approve, we'll secure the loan for you.'
I was thrilled. We drove about ten to fifteen kilometers out of the city until we reached a village. We stopped near an unfinished poultry farm. I looked inside and remarked, 'The ceiling is a bit low for my needs, but it's not a bad place to start. Why was this place abandoned?'
'It belonged to a group of unemployed graduates who were later outed as "Hypocrites" (Mujahedin-e Khalq),' he answered. 'So, we seized it from them.'
'So, what should I do now?' I asked.
'Nothing. Just bring your machine here and finish it.'
I pressed further, 'How much is the rent? Does it have any outstanding bank debts?'

'Don't worry about those details,' he dismissed. 'This place is ours now. Just bring your machine. The brothers from the local Association will come and assist you.'
'I don't need anyone's help,' I stated firmly. 'I just need a place with a door and a lock, and I want to keep the key myself.'
'What difference does it make?' he asked.
I looked at him and said, 'If I build the machine here and eventually want to move it elsewhere, I don't want to be accused of "hypocrisy" just because the building was confiscated.
He snapped at me with annoyance, 'Are you, God forbid, one of the Hypocrites?'
'No,' I replied. 'But what happens tomorrow if the "brothers" decide they don't like me? If this place and the loan are in my name, and I'm accountable to the bank, I'll accept. Otherwise, no.'
'It seems you have a problem with our brothers!' he said coldly.
'No, I have no problem with anyone,' I said. 'But your words suggest this place has no proper boundaries and anyone can just walk in. I need a secure workspace.'
'Then I cannot help you,' he concluded.
We got into the car and drove back. When we reached the square where the unemployed graduates were selling cigarettes, I told the driver, 'Please pull over here; I'm getting out.'
After stepping out, I turned to the Deputy of **Jihad-e Sazandegi** and said, 'Thank you for your time. But you cannot help us. You are better off supporting these young men selling cigarettes.'
Everyone I turned to for help rejected me. Even my middle brother, Torab, kept telling me, 'You spend every cent you earn on building this machine, and in the end, you won't be able to finish it.' He refused to lend me any money.
Meanwhile, my friend Mohammad-Ali had moved in with me. The country's political situation was deteriorating by the day. On one hand, the war with Iraq was raging; on the other, an internal power struggle was intensifying as the **Islamic Republican Party** sought total control over all state institutions.

Every effort made by President **Banisadr** to stabilize the situation was sabotaged by them. They threw every possible obstacle in his path. Gradually, we realized that the promises and goals Khomeini had announced in France were not truly his own in practice; for it was now Banisadr who was striving to realize them. Opposing him were the leaders of the Islamic Republican Party (**Beheshti, Rafsanjani, Khamenei**), who had gained control over the Judiciary, the Legislature, and most importantly, Khomeini himself.

Only the Executive branch remained, and they sought to seize that too by ousting Banisadr to complete their monopoly on power.

Instead of rebuilding the country, they were reconstructing the old system. These confrontations caused us to distance ourselves from Khomeini day by day and move closer to Banisadr’s ideals. Society was spiraling toward a deep polarization.

Leftist parties, such as the **Tudeh Party** and the **Organization of Iranian People's Fadaian Guerrillas**—which had split and were suffering from internal duality—naively believed that if Banisadr fell, the clergy would be unable to govern, and power would eventually fall into their hands. To chase this illusion, they went as far as collaborating with the leaders of the **Islamic Republican Party** to eliminate national forces, including Banisadr.

Gradually, they infiltrated mosques and committees, causing those truly devoted to the revolution to become disillusioned. Their mission became attacking other groups and spying on anyone who didn't even attend the mosque.

Hearing Banisadr’s words, we believed in him when he said: 'The Iranian people threw America out through the door with their revolution, but you brought it back through the window with the hostage crisis.'

He argued: 'Fighting America is not about slogans; you truly fight America when you implement a program of independence and expand freedoms, allowing the society's creative forces to flourish in an open atmosphere, thereby liberating the country from dependency.'

However, the opposing faction was solely focused on seizing power and lacked even the slightest belief in independence or freedom. While the country was at war and Banisadr spent most of his time at the front lines to expel the enemy, they were only preoccupied with ensuring he did not emerge victorious.

Hussain Khomeini, the grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini, revealed that he had attended a meeting where it was explicitly stated:

'It is better for half of Khuzestan to be lost than for Banisadr to emerge victorious in the war.'

Banisadr insisted that 'responsibilities must be held by knowledgeable and capable individuals.' In contrast, the Islamic Republican Party campaigned under the slogan: 'Responsibility must be in the hands of the *Maktabi* (ideologically committed) individuals.'

Under pressure from the Parliament, led by Rafsanjani and with the direct backing of Khomeini, they appointed an incompetent individual as Prime Minister to seize control of the Executive branch as well. When Banisadr was President, the Parliament stripped him of his powers daily, transferring them to the Prime Minister. Yet, years later, when Rafsanjani himself became President, they abolished the position of Prime Minister and returned all those powers to the Presidency!

The Judiciary was under Behti’s control, and they managed Khomeini through his son, Sayyid Ahmad. The only remaining obstacle was Banisadr—the man who tried to keep the people active in the political arena. He used to say: 'Once the people go back to their homes, the funeral of the revolution will be held.'

As young idealists who had fought for the revolution's victory, we couldn't just abandon it halfway. We compared Khomeini’s promises in Paris with his current actions and asked:

'If those promises were truly his, why is he acting against them now?'

This led us to grow closer to Banisadr day by day. The general public shared this sentiment; everywhere we went, people supported him.

Unemployment and Working as a Taxi Driver to Make Ends Meet

"Mohammad-Ali and I traveled to Tehran several times to attend the President's speeches. At Azadi Square, a sea of people stretched as far as the eye could see, listening intently to his words. In contrast, small organized groups of twenty to thirty thugs from the Islamic Republican Party, carrying portraits of Khomeini, Beheshti, and Rafsanjani, would try to disrupt the legal President's speech.

My financial situation was dire. I told Mohammad-Ali, 'From now on, I'll drive the taxi for half the day and you take the other half, so we don't burn through our savings.' Although Mohammad-Ali didn't even have a driver's license, we practiced together until he learned. He started taking the car in the afternoons. Initially, his earnings were decent, but they began to dwindle. When I asked why, he'd claim he had been helping an elderly woman. Later, I discovered he was lying; he had met a young lady and was spending his shifts going on outings with her.

My routine became driving all morning and then filling up the tank so he wouldn't run out of fuel during his 'dates.' I realized Mohammad-Ali was head over heels in love and living in a different world. Instead of contributing to our household expenses, he would just tell me romantic stories. I was forced to put the machine's construction on hold temporarily to earn more income to eventually finish it. The machine, which had become quite heavy, was moved to the courtyard and placed under the eaves of the roof. I covered it with a large plastic sheet to protect it from the rain, said a temporary goodbye to my project, and resolved to work with even greater intensity.

Mohammad-Ali, the hopeless romantic, instead of working harder to reach his love, stopped working altogether. His every thought was consumed by meeting her. He began to 'mistake' my trouser pockets for his own, helping himself to whatever cash he needed without a second thought. My

pocket became a shared fund for him and his sweetheart! Without any shame, he would take money for himself and to buy gifts for her. Without even telling me, he managed to get his license, and soon after, this same man who supposedly had no money for gifts somehow bought an old Opel.

The country's political climate was deteriorating by the day, and confrontations were turning violent. We intensified our activities, taking to the streets at night to spray-paint slogans in support of the constitutional President. I had developed a sharp skill in creating stencils of Banisadr's portrait. In the darkness of night, the work remained hidden, but by daybreak, people would marvel, 'It's as if someone has professionally painted Banisadr's image on the walls!'

Fateful days were approaching one after another. The counter-revolution, disguised in revolutionary robes, was hell-bent on destruction, seeking to replace monarchical tyranny with a religious one. On the international stage, Henry Kissinger had reportedly stated that the U.S. would not tolerate a 'second Japan' in Asia.

Banisadr's popularity was surging because he spoke directly to the people through the *Enghelab-e Eslami* newspaper and his 'Daily Memoirs' (*Karnameh-ye Roozaneh*), identifying the true sources of the nation's crises. This transparency and the army's growing initiative in the war alarmed the internal coup-plotters. To accelerate their 'creeping coup,' they reached out to foreign powers, allegedly striking a secret deal over the hostages with the U.S. Republican campaign.

At the time, we only glimpsed fragments of this through the Daily Memoirs. But when the hostages were released exactly as Reagan won the election, our suspicions were confirmed. It later emerged that this hasty release was the result of a backroom deal. Banisadr refused to sign the Algiers Accords, but Rajai and Behzad Nabavi signed it against the constitution, presenting it to the public merely as a 'declaration.'

In response, Banisadr filed a formal complaint against them. However, in Parliament, a group of opportunistic MPs —some who had ridden his coat-tails to get elected and

others who gained seats through fraud—penned a letter to Khomeini, effectively asking him to 'execute the truth.'
The crackdowns began. Revolutionary Guards were pulled from the front lines and brought to Tehran to suppress the people. Violence intensified, and attacks on political groups escalated. The Tudeh Party, acting on behalf of the Soviets, joined forces with Stalinist factions who branded Banisadr a 'liberal'—simply because his economic programs clashed with Soviet interests. They sang in unison with the Islamic Republican Party to bury the revolution and its true forces, oblivious to the fact that they would eventually fall into the very pit they were digging.
Khomeini demanded that Banisadr withdraw his support for the political parties and publicly condemn them. However, Banisadr responded:
'A President must be the guardian of the rights, dignity, and security of all citizens, even if those groups oppose him. It is his duty to defend their rights so they may operate freely.'
To lead the country out of the deadlock, he wrote in the *Enghelab-e Eslami* newspaper:
'The healthiest path, free of crisis, is for everyone to agree to return to the people; let the people's vote decide the course of our nation.

انقلاب اسلامی
توسط توپخانه نیروی زمینی:
پاسگاه «الشهدای» عراق زیر آتش شدید قرار گرفت
اختصاصی
برای خروج کشور از بن بست کنونی
رئیس جمهور:
سالمترین راه بدون بحران این است که همه موافقت بکنند به مردم مراجعه کنیم و با رأی عمومی آنچه باید بشود، بشود
کارنامه رئیس جمهور
کلیات لایحه
مدیرکل کنسولی

The leaders of the Islamic Republican Party had firmly made up their minds to seize the Executive branch. Ayatollah Khomeini, too, perceived Banisadr's potential victory as a scenario where 'the people would become everything and the clergy nothing,' fearing for his own position. In practice, he became the figurehead of the coup-plotters, delegating all authorities to the party leaders—namely **Beheshti** (Head of Judiciary), **Rafsanjani** (Speaker of Parliament), and **Khamenei** (Tehran's Friday Prayer Leader).

They stripped Banisadr of his command over the Armed Forces and instructed Rafsanjani to 'finish him off' as quickly as possible—a chilling reality we were unaware of then, but later discovered in Rafsanjani's own published memoirs.

The Parliament took on the role of the usurper. Power-hungry representatives, presided over by Rafsanjani, voted for the 'political incompetence' of the nation's elected President. With that vote, the concept of a Republic—the right of the people to self-govern and regulate their own civil relations—was buried. Instead of standing with the people, they ruled over them, reconstructing the very tyranny they had once fought, oblivious to the fact that power is a fleeting mistress.

Across Iran, people poured into the streets to support their first elected President. The Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran), under the command of the Party, were kept in the cities to suppress the public. Only a few remained at the war front; even they had been recalled to Tehran weeks prior. The Guards opened fire on the crowds, making mass arrests, torturing, and executing people in waves. A suffocating security atmosphere gripped the entire country. In this climate, having purchased a large stock of Banisadr's portraits from print shops, I stood under the traffic light at Rasht's Municipality Square. I handed out the photos to taxis and cars stopped at the red light. People looked at me in disbelief, asking, 'Have you grown tired of living?' But in that moment, I had nothing in my mind but the rescue of my beloved: Freedom. I was a lover whose beloved was Liberty, and now a group of power-worshippers sought to imprison her once again.

They armed thirteen and fourteen-year-old children, tasking them with spying on their own families and reporting anyone who spoke against Khomeini. Some, out of sheer ignorance, even turned in their own parents and siblings. Parents, paralyzed by fear, ceased to speak freely even in front of their own children.

Despite everything, I refused to accept the coup. I still held onto a sliver of hope that the people would resist. I repeatedly asked myself: 'How is it possible that a people who rose up to topple one tyranny could now surrender so easily to another?'

Radio Rasht announced that the shopkeepers had closed the bazaar in support of Ayatollah Khomeini. I didn't believe it. My brother Torab, who leaned toward the Tudeh Party, said, 'Why are you being so stubborn? The radio is right.' I refused to accept it and suggested we go to the bazaar ourselves to see the truth.

We reached the gold-sellers' alley. Some shops were bolted shut; others were half-closed. The owners sat out front, guarded and tense, fearing an attack by Basiji thugs. I asked a few: 'Are you closed in support of the President or against him?' No one dared to answer. Torab said, 'They’re too afraid to speak.' I countered, 'If they were truly closed for Khomeini, why the silence?' He had no reply.

As we were leaving, a young man called out to me. He drew me aside, away from my brother. When he asked why I was questioning people, I told him plainly I wanted the truth. He whispered, 'The bazaar is closed in support of Banisadr, but we are staying here because we’ve heard that if we don’t open, the thugs will break the locks and loot our goods.' Hearing this filled me with hope. The next day, I met him again. He was a highly intelligent young man, well-read in Banisadr’s books. I introduced him to Mohammad-Ali, and we formed a team of three. We decided to resist. Our first move was to acquire a photocopier.

Eventually, we found a second-hand machine. We began printing fliers based on the *Enghelab-e Eslami* newspaper and other sources. We would meet at night in various locations to distribute them. I would hide the leaflets between two pieces of Sangak bread. My friend carried glue in a small plastic bucket along with some fruit, making it

look like we were just heading home for a meal. As we walked through the back alleys, we would talk loudly about movies to avoid suspicion, all while sticking fliers on walls or tossing them into courtyards.
This continued until my friend's house was compromised. My own house wasn't safe either; being near the mosque, it was a gathering point for the thugs. The local Committee members knew my political stance, and a raid seemed imminent.
One day, my friend said he had found someone willing to hide the photocopier in his home. He was from a leftist group and lacked resources. We agreed and handed over the machine to lower our profile and reduce the risk.
After a few print runs, we noticed the number of copies we were receiving had dwindled. Later, we discovered that alongside our own fliers, he was also bringing us leaflets from the **Mujahedin (MKO)**. 'My friend said they requested help,' he told us. I initially objected, but my friend argued that they only contained news of arrests and executions. Eventually, I relented, and we began distributing their fliers as well.
However, the printing of our own fliers suddenly stopped. We were later told that the **Komiteh** had raided that house, seized everything, and the photocopier never returned. It eventually came to light that the house belonged to a member of the **Tudeh Party**, and they had essentially confiscated the machine for their own ends

Setting Fire to the Prison and Political Detainees

"In those days, arrests had reached their peak. Every day, news of the execution of young people in various cities reached our ears. Amidst this turmoil, news broke that the Revolutionary Guard (Pasdaran) prison in Rasht—formerly the Mohammad Reza Shah High School at Pol-e Aragh, which had been converted into a detention center—was on fire.

Along with a few others, we rushed toward the Guard headquarters. But the scene we witnessed was both shocking and agonizing: armed Guards, instead of extinguishing the flames and rescuing the prisoners, stood outside the building, blocking people from entering to help. As people saw the wounded burning inside, protests erupted. The crowd grew by the minute, and the Guards, feeling threatened, were forced to haul some of the severely burned prisoners into the back of a pickup truck, under the pretext of taking them to the hospital. The wounded were writhing in agony on the floor of the truck. Despite their condition, a Guard stood over them, aiming his weapon at them to prevent any escape.

It later surfaced that these fires were not limited to Rasht; prisons in several other cities had been set ablaze simultaneously. Their objective was clear: the mass elimination of political prisoners without the need for trials. Had these prisoners been tried, some might have been acquitted or released. By burning the prisons, they 'finished the job' once and for all. Their propaganda then claimed that the prisoners themselves had started the fires and that the Guards had intervened to save them.

An atmosphere of absolute suffocation and violence reigned everywhere. Control of the neighborhoods had even been handed over to thugs and ruffians who had no jobs and no future. Out of unemployment and poverty, they had joined the Committees—the very people who played no part in the revolution’s victory and, in many cases, had been enemies of the revolutionaries. Now, by infiltrating the power structure, they had become tools of suppression, taking revenge on the revolutionaries for the revolution itself.

All members of the Mujahedin (MKO) and leftist groups—except for the Tudeh Party and the 'Majority' faction—and anyone who had been politically active, were either in hiding or arrested. Yet, I continued to pass by the Committee members without fear; they had no idea I was still active. Several times as I walked past our local Committee, one member who was dying to arrest me would shout, 'Death to those against the Guardianship of the Jurist! Death to the hypocrites!' I ignored him and kept

walking, never even glancing back. Once, the head of the Committee stopped him and said, 'Leave him be.
In the midst of all this chaos, my brother Torab kept borrowing my car. The next day, when I'd ask where it was, he'd pause for a long time and then say, 'The car... it wasn't with me!'
'For God's sake, don't torment me,' I'd say. 'Did you forget where you parked it again?'
'You're the one who's confused!' he'd snap back.
'Fine, you're right. I'm confused. Just think for a second—where did you leave it?'
Without a word, he'd stomp off, only to return ten minutes later. 'I remember now. I think I parked it near Cinema Soheila at Sabzeh-Meydan. Then I forgot and took a taxi home.'
'Thank God you remembered,' I'd sigh, preparing to go fetch it. Then he'd call out, 'By the way, take some gas with you; it's bone dry!' Only then would I realize I had to lug a jerrycan of fuel just to get my own car back.
I should be grateful he gave the right address that day. Sometimes he'd wander off and forget the location entirely, leaving me to scout every possible spot with my gas can in hand. If the car had the slightest hiccup, he'd just abandon it right there. He often forgot the keys in the ignition or left the doors unlocked. He'd even brag about it: 'In all the time I've had cars, I never once checked the oil! My friends always did that for me!'
That car was my everything. I had big plans for it. Up to that day, Torab, Mohammad-Ali, and even the neighbors had benefited from it. Whenever someone was ill, I was there to help. On Fridays, in memory of my father, I used the car to give free rides to the elderly. It even served as the wedding car for two couples, bringing joy to their families. I loved doing it; experience had taught me that making people happy isn't that difficult. Seeing their grateful smiles gave me a sense of peace.
But if that car broke down, I'd be stranded too, so I had to nurse it. I kept hoping the country would emerge from this turmoil so I could finally plan my future. On the surface, I looked like a man who had everything; in reality, I had nothing. I had brothers for whom the opium pipe was the

'most obligatory of obligations.' I had a sister in Rasht who was fighting tooth and nail for her children's happiness while her husband was glued to the brazier. And I had other sisters I saw only once a year—one of whom constantly complained about life, terrified that someone might ask her for a loan, so she always played the victim.
My mother was also a wanderer. She had stayed for a while with her brother, a colonel and army dentist in Khorramshahr, but she had caused trouble for him there as well. My uncle used to say, 'She went to the police station to file a complaint against my friends. She claimed they had ripped open her ceiling, entered her room, and assaulted her!'
When my uncle realized how ill his sister was and tried to seek medical treatment for her, she sensed it and fled. After that, no one knew where she was. To be honest, no one was really looking for her either.
The future remained a complete void. I decided to set up a small grocery store in the courtyard of our paternal home. I hoped that this might bring some order to my life, provide a steady income, and finally give me the funds needed to complete my machine.

Building a Grocery Store in the Family Courtyard

"I worked as a professional taxi driver for a few days, and after each shift, I’d spend my time digging the foundation for the shop in our courtyard. I ordered sand, cement, and concrete blocks, specifically asking the seller to deliver them after 6:00 PM. I needed to move them inside before the local street sweeper noticed; if he caught wind of it, he’d report me to the municipality, and they would have shut down the construction immediately.
One day, while I was hauling sand inside by myself, a couple of local youths showed up and lent a hand. We

gradually became friends, and they'd occasionally help me with the building work.
The interior of the shop was finally finished; only the wall facing the street remained to be knocked down so I could install the rolling shutter. Since the shutter was ready, I climbed up the wall and started removing the bricks just as a municipal officer arrived on his bicycle.
'What are you doing up there?' he asked, looking up at me.
'A few of these bricks were loose and about to fall,' I replied smoothly. 'I'm just securing them.'
'Well, be careful they don't fall on anyone's head,' he said, and pedaled away.
I carefully removed every single brick, installed the door, and pulled the shutter down. I cleaned up the area so thoroughly that it looked as if nothing had ever happened. The next day, I waited to see the officer's reaction. As usual, he arrived at the exact same hour on his bike. I watched him through my mother's room window. He braked, leaned his foot against the opposite neighbor's wall while remaining on the saddle, and stared at the new rolling shutter for a moment. It was as if he was asking himself, *'Was this shop here before or not?'*
Then, he just rode off.
The following day, I used the salvaged bricks to build a small storage room at the back of the shop. I moved on to the carpentry—installing shelves and other fixtures. All that remained was the front display window and the glass panes, but by then, my money had run out.
I turned to my eldest sister, Simin, and asked her for five
.thousand tomans
.I don't have it,' she said flatly'
The shop is built,' I pleaded, 'I just need to buy the glass for'
'.the storefront
'.Again, she insisted, 'I don't have it
I swear to God,' I told her, 'I'll sell my car and pay you '
'.back
She looked at me and said, 'Just tape some plastic over it
'!instead of glass
.I just laughed and walked away

Accident, Conflict, Gunfire, Prison

"I had no choice but to sell my car. My Zhyan needed some bodywork and paint; I had to fix it up to get a good price, otherwise, I'd be forced to let it go for next to nothing. I bought sandpaper and paint, moved the car into the shop, and got to work on the dents. When I was done, it looked like a gem. I parked it in the alley, planning to head to the dealership in the morning to sell it and use the money to heal the 'wounds' of my life—even though I desperately needed that car to haul goods for the shop.

I woke up early. I had planned to deliver some large portraits of President Banisadr to a friend on my way. I tucked the photos into a plastic bag and stowed them under the seat. I said a quick *Bismillah* and started the engine. As I was pulling out of the alley, I saw a car speeding toward me. I floored it and narrowly dodged the hit. However, the driver lost control and grazed Mohammad-Ali's Opel, which was parked under our window. The damage wasn't serious. I heard the screech and thought if I sped away, he'd think I was at fault and trying to escape. Looking through the rearview mirror, I saw him pull a U-turn and begin tailing me.

We reached the Mikaeel Intersection, a major square in the city. He overtook me and swerved in front of my car, just like in the movies. He and his friend hopped out and marched toward me. The driver had the 'Hezbollahi' look; one of his arms was bandaged and hanging in a sling. I rolled down the window to see what he wanted. He immediately began hurling vile insults:

'You son of a...! You hit me and then you run?!'

I didn't engage. I simply said, 'How could I have hit your car when mine doesn't have a single scratch?'

He started cursing again. Suddenly, he delivered a hard slap to my ear and barked, 'I'll show you!'

Then he got back into his car. I thought to myself, *'Thank God that's over.'* I waited for him to move. He started his engine, pulled forward a meter, then slammed it into

reverse and crashed full-force into my car. My world spun. I watched as all my plans were crushed in an instant.
I got out and looked at the front of my car; the hood had buckled, and the only thing I saw within reach was the car jack. I grabbed it and smashed it hard against the back of his car. Both men jumped out and lunged at me. I fought back with the jack, striking the driver’s leg, and they both fled.
There I stood, clutching a jack, with a wrecked car and shattered dreams. In a fit of rage, I used the jack to smash his rear window first. Then I began to demolish the doors and glass; I didn't want a single part of that car to remain intact. Suddenly, the crack of gunfire rang out and someone roared:
'Halt!'
It felt as if I were in the middle of a battlefield.
I snapped back to reality and looked around. More than ten Revolutionary Guards and Committee members had surrounded me, their rifles leveled at my chest. A massive crowd had formed a circle, watching me. One of the officers barked:
'Drop the jack and put your hands up!'
I finally complied. They moved in and seized me. One of them, named Siavash—a childhood friend of mine—recognized me. He stepped forward and said:
'Seyyed, my friend, I’ve never seen this side of you.'
With an unexpected kindness, he asked me to get into the Committee vehicle and accompany them to headquarters.
'What about my car?' I asked.
'Give the keys to the brothers,' he replied, 'they’ll bring it to the station.'
'The keys are inside,' I said.
In that exact moment, it hit me: one side of my keychain held a photo of President Banisadr, and the other side, a photo of myself. Furthermore, a large stack of Banisadr’s portraits was hidden under the seat, meant for my friend. I thought to myself: if the person driving the car notices these photos, they won’t care about my fight with those two men anymore; I’ll be condemned instantly and will have to say goodbye to this world. At that time, Banisadr was still in hiding and had not yet fled Iran.

I was lost in these dark thoughts when Siavash—the childhood friend who now held power in the Committee, a man who could take or save a life—turned to me and said: 'Seyyed, don't worry. We know everything.
For a split second, I thought he was referring to my political :activities. Stunned, I asked
'?What exactly do you know'
Someone who witnessed the whole incident from start to ' finish called us,' he replied. 'They told us you aren't at fault '.at all
:Then he added
I have a special respect for you, and I'll do whatever I can ' '.to help you

Inspecting the Rasht Committee Prison: Swapping the Detainees

"I knew full well that if those photos were discovered, even Siavash wouldn't be able to save me.
We arrived at the Committee headquarters and stepped out of the vehicle. We entered a room filled with Committee members, and Siavash asked me to take a seat. It was a peculiar day; due to numerous complaints from prisoners' families regarding violence and torture, representatives from human rights organizations had arrived for an inspection. They were scheduled to visit the Rasht Committee prison as well.
Surprised by the commotion, I asked Siavash, 'Why is it so crowded? Is something going on?'
With a certain misplaced trust in me, he replied, 'The "Hypocrites" abroad have spread rumors that we torture prisoners. That's why there's an inspection today.'
'Do you even have prisoners here?' I asked.
'Yes,' he said, 'we had a number of them. The brothers are currently "swapping" them out.'
'What do you mean, swapping?' I asked, stunned.

He smiled. 'We're moving the real prisoners out of here. In their place, some of our own "brothers" will go into the cells to answer the questions of the reporters and those American human rights reps. We won't let the killers of our brothers play the victim!'
At that moment, the two men I had fought with entered the room and sat down. One of the officers asked the driver to recount the incident. Noticing that the hem of my shirt was torn and a button was dangling, I quietly asked Siavash for a needle and thread. He obliged and went to get them for me.
The driver, witnessing Siavash's friendly demeanor toward me, assumed I was a Committee member and suspected nepotism was at play. Once he finished his account of the incident, the officer told him:
'More than half of what you've said is a lie. We're giving you a chance to tell the truth, because an eyewitness called in and reported everything.'
The driver stubbornly insisted his version was the truth. The officer concluded, 'Regardless, our report is complete. We are referring the case to the police station (*Kalantari*), as this dispute falls outside the Committee's jurisdiction.'
We were handed over to the nearest police station. The chief read the Committee's report. I confirmed its accuracy, but the driver protested:
'I don't accept this at all. This report is a fabrication.'
Knowing there were often frictions between the Committee and the regular police, he tried to exploit the situation. He asked for a private audience with the chief, but the chief refused, saying, 'If you have something to say, say it here.'
'This man is a Committee member himself,' the driver claimed. 'I want to speak in private.'
The chief ordered me to be taken out of the room temporarily.
In the station's courtyard, my eyes fell upon my car. I walked over to inspect it; the damage wasn't as bad as I had feared. The fender was slightly dented, and the hood wouldn't latch properly. I thought to myself, *'I wish I hadn't lost my temper and attacked them.'*
A few minutes later, I was called back in. The chief said, 'The opposing party disputes the Committee's report. We

must dispatch an officer for a field investigation.'
'If he drops the charges, I'll drop mine as well,' I offered.
But they, still convinced I was a privileged Committee member, snapped, 'We won't grant consent, and we don't accept this report!'
An officer was then dispatched to conduct a field inquiry. The officer returned after an hour or two. The Chief of the Police Station summoned us again and said:
'The new report matches the Committee's exactly. So, either you reconcile now, or I'm sending you to the Judiciary.'
'I have no complaints,' I said.
But the driver protested, 'He smashed my car to pieces, and now he says he has no complaints?!'
Even though I was broke, I offered, 'I'm willing to pay for half the damages to your car.'
Still, he wouldn't budge. It was clear now that his beard and religious appearance had nothing to do with being a 'Hezbollahi'; he was simply after personal revenge. Finally, the Chief handed the file to an officer and said, 'Take them to the courthouse.'
At the Judiciary, the case fell to a female judge—stern, frowning, and short-tempered. One of her eyes was bandaged. She said:
'You have one hour. Either reach a settlement or provide bail; otherwise, you're going to jail until the trial date.'
'I agree to settle,' I said.
But the judge countered, 'Your consent isn't enough. the opposing party must also agree.'
The driver's friend interjected, 'I have no complaints.'
I stepped forward and told the driver, 'This is going to be a long-drawn-out story. Come on, let it go so we can both be done with this.'
But he was still fixated on revenge.
Now we were left with less than an hour to find someone to post bail. The judge told the driver, 'Go get a property deed and come back quickly.'
'Don't worry,' he said confidently, 'I'll be back with ten deeds!'
I had no hope in my family, so I didn't even try to secure bail.

However, before the hour was up, I saw my young friend Sa’eed arrive with his father. He held a deed in his hand to bail me out. My heart warmed. We headed to the interrogator’s office, but he was nowhere to be found. We searched everywhere, but he had vanished.
Only fifteen minutes were left, and there was no sign of either the interrogator or the opposing party. It was Thursday evening. Handcuffed, we were sent off to prison.
Saeed’s father said:
— 'Don't worry. I’ll bring the title deed tomorrow and get you out.'
He asked:
— 'Do you want me to inform anyone?'
I replied:
— 'Just tell Mohammad-Ali I’m in prison. Tell him to come visit.'
My friend was upset that I had to spend the night in jail. He said goodbye with a heavy heart. We were handed over to the police prison. The plaintiff, who thought he would be going home while only I remained in jail, was now slowly starting to regret it; yet, he wouldn't admit it.
I passed by the high walls and barbed wires. I told myself: 'I wish I hadn't taken the car for sale that day; I wish the fight hadn't happened...' But I knew that in life, nothing goes according to plan. I had to walk my own path.
As soon as I entered the prison, I saw one of my friends from my military service days; the same one I had helped back then, asking him to give up gambling. He was shocked to see me. He came forward and said:
— 'Seyed! What are you doing here?'
He immediately turned to the prison guard and asked:
— 'Can he come to our cell?'
The guard replied: 'Do you have room?'
— 'There’s one spot; and even if there wasn't, he's willing to sleep on the floor.'
The guard nodded and gave permission. My friend warmly took my hand and led me into the cell. He introduced me to the other prisoners and said:
— 'This is my friend from military service. He helped me a lot.

One by one, the cellmates stood up and welcomed me. One of the prisoners, who had a blanket draped over his shoulders and was sitting in the corner of the cell, looked at me and said with a smile:
— 'A friend of our friend is our own friend. Tonight, you are our guest.'
He then asked everyone to treat me well, and they truly did. In my mind, however, I was constantly thinking about the plaintiff. I didn't know where he was, which cell he was in, or how he was spending his night. Deep down, I hoped he wasn't suffering.
Night had fallen. They spread the dinner cloth in the middle of the cell, and we were eating when suddenly a commotion and uproar broke out from outside the cells. The guard came and told everyone to come out to watch television. When we arrived, we saw Mr. Banisadr's image on the screen; he was being interviewed at the Paris airport. A few prisoners, who were members of the 'Komiteh' (Revolutionary Committees), were upset that Banisadr had survived and expressed this loudly. At that moment, the other prisoners angrily fell upon them and began beating them, until the guards rescued them from the prisoners' hands. The television was turned off, the guards were reinforced, and everyone was ordered back to their cells. Some thought there had been a coup. Some thought Mr. Banisadr had returned. It was a strange atmosphere. I fell asleep that night with the hope of morning freedom.
Morning came, and one of the guards arrived and said:
— 'You have a visitor.'
I joyfully headed toward the exit. I thought it must be Mohammad-Ali or one of my brothers. In the visiting hall, I saw Saeed, my friend, had come with his father—title deed in hand.
However, they had been told that since it was Friday and everything was closed, release was impossible. They were upset, but they promised to return the next day. They asked if I needed anything.
I said, 'No, just tell Mohammad-Ali to come and visit me.'
Saeed said:
— 'I told him yesterday; he said he was busy. Torab (your brother) also said to ask you if you want him to come.'

I replied:
— 'No, it's not necessary. Just inform Mohammad-Ali.'
(Because I had pinned all my hopes on his friendship.)
On the way back, I saw the plaintiff. I called out to him and said:
— 'See? You got yourself in trouble and me too.'
With a grim face, he replied:
— 'You haven't seen the half of it yet...!'
After the exercise hour, I asked one of my friends in the prison to look into the plaintiff's background. He came back and said:
— 'He’s not a Hezbollahi; his cellmates say he’s likely a Mojahedin supporter.'
That day passed as well, and still, there was no sign of Mohammad-Ali. Saturday morning came, but again, neither Mohammad-Ali nor Saeed and his father showed up. I gradually began to think that perhaps they had forgotten everything. But near sunset, they arrived, title deed in hand. Finally, they set me free.
when I stepped outside, I heard that the plaintiff was still in prison. No one had posted bail for him. I turned to Saeed’s father and said:
— 'Now that you’ve shown me such kindness, if you can, please post bail for him too so he can be released.'
He accepted with great magnanimity. We went to the officer and asked him to check if the man had anyone to help; we told him we were ready to provide the title deed for his release. The officer went and returned, saying:
— 'He says his own release papers have already arrived!'

The Lesson Prison Taught Me

We left the prison with peace of mind and headed toward Sagharisazan. My only grievance was why Mohammad-Ali hadn't come to visit me. I went straight to his father, who was standing in front of the confectionery with his fruit cart. He was overjoyed to see me. I asked:
— 'Where is Mohammad-Ali?'
He replied: 'My son is dishonorable; don't pay him any

mind.'
I said: 'Didn't he know I was in prison? I needed him as a friend.'
He said: 'I told this boy two or three times that you were locked up. I asked him why he wouldn't go visit Mansour. He'd say he was busy, but most of the time he was just at home.'
Just then, Mohammad-Ali walked toward us. Seeing me, he said: 'That was quick! Released already?'
I said: 'Thanks to your kindness!'
He asked: 'So what's the big deal? Prison is a place for men.'
I replied: 'Prison isn't necessarily for men, but in just these two days, I learned which of my friends were men and which were not.'
He said: 'It's good you were only there for two days. What would you say if it had been a month?'
I said: 'Two days were enough to know you. Thank you for waking me up. From today on, do not consider me your friend. We are just acquaintances, and this has nothing to do with your family. Your family remains my family.'
I had been naive, even planning to pay for his education, but he proved he didn't value friendship. He was an opportunist, not a friend. Despite my emotional attachment, I made my decision. He didn't seem to care at all; he was indifferent.
Sometimes in the evenings, I would go to Saeed's father's carpentry shop. Mohammad-Ali would usually show up too, inviting himself to eat with us without hesitation. Once, after a snack, I mentioned: 'Golsar is 20 Tomans [for a ride], while it's only 10 by taxi.'
With a smile, he said: 'Get in the car while I grab one last bite.'
He drove me to Golsar and took the 20 Tomans. He didn't even offer a courtesy gesture to refuse the money.
The next day, Saeed asked:
— 'Did Mohammad-Ali actually charge you for the ride?'
I said: 'Yes, I gave him twenty Tomans, and he took it.'
Saeed couldn't believe it. He asked: 'Are you joking?'
'No, I'm serious,' I replied.
He said: 'What a dishonorable man! Everything he has, he

owes to you. He learned to drive with your car, he bought his own car with the income he made from yours, and he even met his girlfriend using your car. And now he has the nerve to take fare money from you!'
I said: 'Everyone reaps what they sow in their heart. His action helped me understand people better.'
Saeed appreciated my reaction, and our bond grew stronger by the day. If anyone ever disrespected me, Saeed was ready to defend me.
Saeed was a handsome young man, but the 'Hezbollahis' would constantly harass him:
— 'Why is your hair like this? Why are you dressed like that?'
When we walked together, these issues often arose. I suggested it would be better to spend more time in front of his father's shop so I could help out. He also tried to spend more time with me, coming to our house in the evenings because he enjoyed my company.
One day, one of those individuals, who introduced himself as 'Fereydoon,' approached us and started talking. A few days later, he gradually worked his way into our circle. Until one day, as I was saying goodbye to Saeed and his friends, Fereydoon said:
— 'I'll come with you. I want to walk and talk.'
I agreed. He turned to me and said:
— 'I've taken a liking to you. I had a mission to get close to you and see what you're up to.'
I said: 'The last thing your face looks like is a secret agent! Have you been watching too many James Bond movies?'
He said: 'You don't believe me? I even have a warrant to search your house.'
I replied: 'Since when do you guys use warrants to enter people's homes? I wouldn't let anyone in even with a warrant, unless they broke the door down! But if you'd like, you can come over whenever you want. Now, what exactly is your mission?'
He said:
— 'I'm looking for books and other things.'
I said: 'I don't care about your warrant, but if you have the guts, come to our house right now.'
He asked: 'Are you serious?'

'Yes, why not?' I replied.
As we approached the house, the power suddenly went out. He got scared and tried to say goodbye.
I said: 'What happened? Didn't you want to search our house?'
He said: 'Let’s leave it for another day.'
I told him: 'Don't be afraid, come on in.'
'It’s dark now,' he said.
I countered: 'I have a flashlight!'
'No... later,' he muttered.
Jokingly, I asked: 'So, why did you lie about having a warrant?'
He hugged me and asked: 'Can I be your friend?'
I asked: 'Are you being straight with me? No hidden agenda?'
'No, I swear to God!' he replied.
When the power came back, I said: 'If you still want to, let's go inside.'
He said: 'No, but I'd like to talk to you while we walk.'
I agreed. Along the way, he told me about his life's struggles; his father had been an alcoholic during the Shah's era, his body was covered in tattoos, and he constantly fought with his mother. The neighbors looked down on them with heavy, judgmental eyes. He wanted to escape his family; he even wanted to go to the front lines of the war, but the local association hadn't approved him...
I asked him: 'Don't you have anyone in Tehran or another city where you could live or work for a while?'
He said: 'No.'
A few days later, the doorbell rang. I opened the door and saw Saeed’s mother standing there. I greeted her and asked: 'Has something happened? Is Saeed okay?' She said: 'No, I just wanted to talk to you for a moment.' I invited her in: 'Please, come inside.' She replied: 'No, right here is fine.' She said: 'Saeed doesn't know I've come here; if he finds out, he'll make my life miserable.' I asked: 'What has happened?' She replied: 'First, swear you won't tell him anything.' I said: 'I promise.' She continued: 'Saeed’s studies aren't going well because he wants to be with you every day, even though his exams are coming up and he needs to get his diploma. He doesn't listen to whatever I tell

him, but since he's fond of you, I thought you could talk to him—tell him not to come over for a while until he finishes his exams. I feel at ease when he's with you, but if he fails his exams, he'll fall far behind in life.' I promised her I would do my best.
One day, I brought up the matter with one of my friends who visited in the evenings and whom Saeed also knew. I told him: 'In front of Saeed, I'm going to tell both of you that my house is under surveillance by the "Komiteh," and I'll ask you not to come over for a while. I'll let you know when the threat is gone.' I did this so Saeed wouldn't feel I was only targeting him. My friend agreed.
The next day when they came over, I told them: 'One of the local Komiteh guys warned me to be careful, because they're saying at the mosque that suspicious people are frequenting your house, and they might raid it. That's why I'm asking you not to come to my house for a bit until things settle down.' My friend accepted, but Saeed said: 'To hell with them! I won't leave you alone. Let them raid! What are we doing that they'd want to arrest us for?'
I told Saeed: 'I appreciate it, but I'm asking you to do this for my sake.' I also told him: 'During this time, you can focus on your studies, and we'll be together afterward.' Upon hearing this, Saeed asked: 'Did my mother say something to you?' I said: 'No, I'm the one asking you.' Saeed stood up in distress and walked out of the house in a huff.
A few days later, I realized that Saeed had apparently followed my friend and saw that he was still visiting my house. This made him even more resentful, but nonetheless, he buried himself in his studies and passed his exams successfully. His mother thanked me profusely. However, Saeed held a grudge against me and was waiting for an opportunity to get even.
I decided to repair my car to prepare it for sale; I had the damaged fender fixed, and the car looked as good as new. On Thursday night, I went to my sister's house in Golsar and stayed over. In the morning, when I woke up to take the car to the market, I saw it wasn't in the yard. I asked my sister:
— 'Where is my car?'

She said: 'Torab, your brother, took it in a hurry and said he’d bring it back himself.'
I walked toward Sagharisazan to see Saeed’s father. Upon seeing me, Saeed walked out of the shop. His father laughed and asked:
— 'Saeed loves you so much, but why is he running away from you?'
I then realized that his mother hadn't even mentioned her conversation with me to her husband. I asked:
— 'Do you really not know why Saeed is upset with me?'
He said: 'No.'
'Are you joking?' I asked.
'No,' he replied, 'what should I know?'
I said: 'Nothing, I just thought you were aware.' Then I added: 'I asked Saeed not to come over for a while until his exams were over, and that’s why he’s annoyed with me.'
I returned home that night. There was no sign of my brother. He returned the next morning, but as usual, there was no sign of the car. I asked:
— 'Where is the car?'
He thought for a moment and said:
— 'It ran out of gas. I left it in an alley in Golsar, near your sister's house.'
He didn't know the name of the street. He said: 'Golsar is small; if you look around, you'll find it.'
He drew a map on a piece of paper, and I went looking for the car. I searched up and down the Golsar neighborhood, but there was no trace of it. In one of the alleys that matched the map, a man came forward and asked:
— 'Are you looking for an address?'
I said: 'No, I'm looking for my car.'
He asked: 'What car?'
I replied: 'A lemon-yellow Jian.'
He said: 'I haven't seen it today, but yesterday there was a Jian here with its door open, and kids were playing in it. The neighbors got suspicious and called the police. Last night, the officers came and towed it to the Golsar police station.'
I thanked him and, after some inquiries, found the police station. At the entrance, the guard asked about my business.
I said: 'My car was brought here last night—a lemon-yellow

Jian.'
He pointed into the yard: 'That one over there?'
I looked. Yes, it was mine. But the front of the car was crashed—exactly where I had just finished the bodywork. I thought to myself: 'Torab didn't say a word about an accident!'
I went to the duty officer’s room, knocked, and entered. I said: 'I've come to take my car, but I saw it's been in an accident. The car was fine when it was parked.'
The officer said: 'I'm sorry for what happened.'
'What exactly happened?' I asked.
He explained that last night, a report came in about a car left in an alley with its doors open, and kids playing inside. The officers towed the car to the station. At a roundabout, the Jian’s steering wheel locked, and it collided with another vehicle. The officer had to pay for the damages out of his own pocket to settle with the other party.
The duty officer said: 'Please, don't file a complaint against him. He’s just an officer; his salary is low.'
I replied: 'My situation isn't much better. I had just repaired the car and was planning to sell it today.'
The officer asked: 'Why did you park it in front of someone's house and leave it unlocked anyway?'
I said: 'It ran out of gas. I went to get fuel, and when I returned, it was gone.'
He asked: 'Where do you live?'
'Khomiran Zahedan,' I replied.
'What were you doing in Golsar?'
I said: 'My sister's house is here.'
I gave him the address. He asked: 'Is it so-and-so?'
'Yes,' I replied.
He said: 'I know your brother-in-law; he’s a real "looti" [a generous, honorable man]. Let’s go talk to him and settle this.'
I went and told my brother-in-law the whole story. We went back to the police station together. Upon seeing him, the officer came forward, greeted him warmly, and they embraced. Then, he asked my brother-in-law to convince me to drop the matter.'
My brother-in-law said: 'I know you're struggling yourself, but please, forgive him.'

I said: 'My brother’s recklessness is really hurting me. Fine, I won’t file a complaint, but my car has suffered significant damage. I was supposed to sell it today.'
He replied: 'Perhaps it was God's will for this to happen, to prevent something even worse.'
Reluctantly, I accepted and let it go. The duty officer called the patrolman who caused the damage and told him: 'They’ve granted their consent; no charges.'
The patrolman thanked us and told me: 'I know a good body-work specialist who will fix your car at a fair price.'
I took the address, but I had no money left for repairs. I just put some gas in and returned to my sister's house. My brother was there too. I was deeply dejected. I sat in the corner of the room, feeling overwhelmed, wondering what to do with all these problems.
My brother asked: 'What happened? You look like your world has collapsed. Be grateful you found your car.'
I said: 'Yes... at the police station!'
He laughed and said with utter nerve: 'What luck you have!'
I replied: 'You’re right. Luck is raining down on me from everywhere, all thanks to your "kindness".'
He snapped: 'What does the police towing your car have to do with me?'
I said: 'If you had put a little gas in the tank instead of fooling around with your friends, this wouldn't have happened.'
He said: 'My social life is none of your business.'
To avoid further argument, I just said: 'Fine, just leave me alone. Maybe I can find a way out of this misery.'
I had pinned my hopes on selling the car today, buying inventory with the money, and reopening the shop... but once again, thanks to "you guys," it didn't happen.
One of his friends, who was a bank manager and sat there completely high, said: 'Thank God you're healthy. Money comes and goes, but health doesn't.'
But because he was high and in a world of his own, he couldn't grasp the miseries of the people around him or the heavy burden they carried on their shoulders.
My brother said: 'I already told you, there’s no need to take your car to an agency to sell it. My company wants to buy it. Whenever you're ready to sell, just tell me.'

I said: 'For now, I need the money to buy inventory and get the shop running.'
He said nothing. He didn't even offer to pay a portion of the car's repair costs as a courtesy, even though he always had money for buying opium and hosting his friends.

Meeting a Merchant and the Help He Gave Me

I thought it over and concluded that I would always need a vehicle to procure supplies for the shop, so I couldn't sell it right now. Therefore, I decided to work as a taxi driver for a while and gradually buy inventory for the store. I hammered out some of the car's dents myself and started driving. I was so immersed in work that no one heard from me; I was sleeping only three or four hours a day.
Until one day, a passenger asked me to take him home and wait to drive him back to the bazaar. During our time in the car, we talked about everything. He told me he liked my character and asked:
— 'Do you always work as a driver?'
I said: 'No, it's out of necessity.'
He said: 'Don't be upset, because you're lucky to have met me today. I like you and I can see you have grit (gannam). That’s why I want to help you.'
I thanked him and asked: 'What kind of help?'
He replied: 'Write a list of things you need for your shop and come to my chamber (hojreh) tomorrow.'
I said: 'Haji, you must be joking! I don't have enough money.'
He said: 'Come tomorrow; we'll talk over the shopping list. God is great.'
I prepared a list and went to the bazaar the next day. Everywhere I went, I asked for him, and everyone knew him. Finally, I found his shop—a very large one with several

workers. When he saw me, he smiled and said to his worker:
— 'Bring two teas.'
He then asked me to sit on the chair beside him. Before I could even settle in, he asked:
— 'Did you bring the list?'
'Yes,' I replied, pullng it shyly from my pocket and handing it to him. He glanced at the list and laughed. I asked:
— 'What’s happened? Why are you laughing?'
He said: 'This list you’ve written isn't for a shop; it’s for a kiosk!'
Then, he personally increased the quantity of every item tenfold.
I said: 'Haji, I swear by God, I don't have the money.'
He laughed and said: 'All my customers have one month of credit; meaning they pay for the goods they buy after a month. Since you are new to this, I will give you two months of credit.'
I said: 'Haji, you don't even know me.'
He answered: 'I know you well, and I know you aren't someone who would cheat others out of their money.'
Some of the items on the list weren't in his warehouse. He sent his worker to procure them for me from his merchant friends in the bazaar. He also gave me an invoice so I would know the cost price and specified the profit margin I should add to each item. A full pickup truck was loaded. I gave him my shop's address and drove there myself to wait for the truck.
When the truck arrived, I asked the driver to enter the alley so I could carry the goods inside. Two local neighborhood kids helped me unload. I moved the goods from inside the house to the shop and arranged them on the shelves. Stocking the shelves lasted until four in the morning. I printed a large photo of my father, about 30 by 40 centimeters, framed it, and hung it above me. I felt a special excitement that day, unsure if I could handle running a shop. Some had said I wouldn't succeed because I lacked sufficient capital and that if someone said they had no money, I would just give them the goods—that people would take so much on credit that I’d eventually go bankrupt.

At seven in the morning, I pulled up the shop’s shutters and waited for my first customer. I had prepared a small notebook to write down any items I lacked, so I could gradually complete the inventory. The first customer walked in, looked around, smiled, wished me luck, and left. Little by little, more customers came, and I slowly procured the missing items. In the beginning, since I didn't have much capital, I went to the bazaar every day for purchases. I didn't carry rationed (coupon) goods because I didn't have a business license yet, so I couldn't provide milk or yogurt either. There was a small shop near mine that sold rationed goods, milk, and yogurt; one of the owner's sons had been my classmate in elementary school.

A few weeks passed, and my shop gradually established itself. I was getting along well with the people. Until one day, the owner of that neighboring shop came over and started complaining. He said:

— 'I have a family of six to support with this small shop, but you are single and don't need much money. Because of that, you sell goods cheaply, and my customers are buying from you instead.'

I told him: 'I have no intention of competing. You know I'm new to this.'

He asked: 'What percentage of profit do you add to the goods?'

I said: '15 percent.'

He laughed and said: 'Prices are rising day by day. You sell an item today, but tomorrow when you go to the bazaar, you'll have to buy that same item at least 4 to 5 percent more expensive.'

I asked: 'Then what percentage should I take?'

He said: 'At least 30 percent.'

'That’s too much,' I replied.

He said: 'If it’s any less, I’ll go bankrupt.'

Reluctantly, I told him: 'From now on, I’ll try to keep our prices similar.'

He thanked me, but it was clear from his face that he was feeling the pressure. Before I opened my shop, he was the sole player with no rivals. I didn't want to be his competitor; I had only turned to shopkeeping out of necessity.

A Verbal Clash with an Old Woman and the Rest of the Story

I hadn't been running the shop for many days when one morning, after pulling up the shutters and arranging the baskets of onions and potatoes outside, I stepped back inside. I saw an elderly lady standing at the door. She :asked
'?How much are the potatoes per kilo' —
'.I said: 'Five Tomans per kilo
She replied crankily: 'Why so expensive? Just a few steps '.away, at the passage, they're selling them for four
I knew she was lying because no one was selling cheaper :than me. I said
'.Well, mother, if it's cheaper there, buy from that shop' —
'.She said: 'No, I want to buy from my own neighbor
I said: 'Since you're my first customer today and I don't want you to leave unhappy, fine—four Tomans per kilo. How '?many kilos would you like
'.She said: 'Five kilos
I grabbed a five-kilo bag, went out, and started filling it. She :protested
'.I want to pick them myself' —
I said: 'Mother, when we buy a sack of potatoes, it has ten kilos of large and medium ones and ten kilos of small ones. I'll give you the bag, but for heaven's sake (Hazrat-e '.Abbasi), pick a mix of small and large
She agreed. I gave her the bag and went inside. But when I returned, I saw she had filled the bag with only the largest :ones. I said
Mother, I trusted you; I asked you to take a mix, but you ' — only picked the large ones. I can't even sell those small ones '.for two Tomans
She snapped: 'Since you're being like this, I don't want '!them at all
She left in a huff. I emptied the potatoes back, feeling .completely dejected

A Verbal Clash with an Old Woman and the Rest of the Story

I hadn't been running the shop for many days when one morning, after pulling up the shutters and arranging the baskets of onions and potatoes outside, I stepped back inside. I saw an elderly lady standing at the door. She :asked

'?How much are the potatoes per kilo' —

'.I said: 'Five Tomans per kilo

She replied crankily: 'Why so expensive? Just a few steps '.away, at the passage, they're selling them for four

I knew she was lying because no one was selling cheaper :than me. I said

'.Well, mother, if it's cheaper there, buy from that shop' —

'.She said: 'No, I want to buy from my own neighbor

I said: 'Since you're my first customer today and I don't want you to leave unhappy, fine—four Tomans per kilo. How '?many kilos would you like

'.She said: 'Five kilos

I grabbed a five-kilo bag, went out, and started filling it. She :protested

'.I want to pick them myself' —

I said: 'Mother, when we buy a sack of potatoes, it has ten kilos of large and medium ones and ten kilos of small ones. I'll give you the bag, but for heaven's sake (Hazrat-e '.Abbasi), pick a mix of small and large

She agreed. I gave her the bag and went inside. But when I returned, I saw she had filled the bag with only the largest :ones. I said

Mother, I trusted you; I asked you to take a mix, but you ' — only picked the large ones. I can't even sell those small ones '.for two Tomans

She snapped: 'Since you're being like this, I don't want '!them at all

She left in a huff. I emptied the potatoes back, feeling .completely dejected

The next day, when I opened the shop, I saw her approaching from a distance. I went inside so I wouldn't have to face her. But she entered, her eyes welling with tears. She pointed toward my father’s photo hanging above me and asked:
— 'Who is that gentleman?'
I said: 'That is my late father.'
While weeping, she said: 'I implore you by your father’s soul, please forgive me.'
I said: 'But mother, you didn't really do anything.'
She replied: 'Yes, I did. I troubled you yesterday. For God's sake, forgive me.'
I asked: 'I swear I'm not upset with you. But why are you crying?'
She said: 'I was praying my morning prayer when your father came to me in a dream. He said: "Haj-Khanum, do you know your prayer is void?" I asked why. He said: "Because you broke the heart of a *Seyed*. That young man opened this shop out of necessity; he is in need. You should have helped him, not upset him." He told me: "Go and apologize to him before it's too late."'
She apologized over and over. I told her: 'Mother, rest assured, I am not upset.'
She looked at my father’s photo and said: 'Your son has forgiven me. Now, give me five kilos of potatoes.'
I handed her a bag and said: 'If it’s not too difficult, fill the bag yourself.'
She replied: 'No, you are a *Seyed*. I want you to give them to me with your own hands.'
I agreed, and she left happily.
Later, I heard she shared the story with the women at the mosque. From then on, the vows and offerings (*Nazr*) began. One for an easy childbirth, one for a suitor, one for a son away at the war front. Sometimes someone would come in, buy nothing, just say hello, place an envelope in front of me, and leave. I would ask: 'What is this for?' They’d say: 'It was my vow; it has been fulfilled.'
Someone even vowed cigarettes for me! I said: 'Can one even vow cigarettes?' They replied: 'I saw you smoke, so I vowed cigarettes!'
From that day, the idea came to me to place a charity box in

the shop—both for the offerings and to help the needy. When customers didn't want their change, they would say: 'Drop it in the box.
As school season approached, families would come in with their shopping lists. Some would ask for 'ten of each' even if the list only required two notebooks. But one customer, who had come with his daughter, was hesitating to step forward out of fear or shame. I told him: 'Come forward, it’s your turn.'
He said: 'We’re in no rush.'
His daughter blurted out: 'Dad, why are you lying?'
I knew he couldn't afford to buy anything. He waited until the shop was empty, then approached timidly. The little girl handed me the list and began reading: 'Two hundred-page notebooks...'
I had three types of notebooks. The father asked: 'How much is the cheapest one?'
Then he asked: 'Don't you have ten-page ones?'
The girl said: 'The teacher said a hundred pages.'
The father replied: 'You won't write it all in one day anyway.'
I told the father: 'Sit on the chair. Don't worry about your daughter.'
I took the list and prepared everything for her—neither the most expensive nor the cheapest. I packed it all and handed it over. The father looked like he was about to have a heart attack. I told him: 'Go, come back and settle the tab later.'
He said: 'But...'
I insisted: 'Don't worry, just go.'
In the evening, he returned with the package still sealed.
He said: 'This was a trust you gave us.'
I said: 'These belong to your daughter.'
He replied: 'I cannot pay for this. At least give me the cheaper ones.'
I told him: 'You don't need to pay. These were given by people to help. You are just the vessel. Whenever you become wealthy, help others.'
He dropped twenty Tomans into the charity box and left with a smile.
Gradually, the shop became a hub for the neighborhood—a place for visits, advice, and encouragement. From the

mosque's prayer leader, Agha Seyyed Abbas, to a troubled married woman, or a boy from the 'Komiteh' who had gone to the front but whose heart was still elsewhere...
Customers became friends. They shared their sorrows more than their joys. But I was happy. I felt I was following in my father’s footsteps. The feeling of being useful was more rewarding than anything else.

Creating Needle-Punched Slogans Against the Coup Regime

Among the customers, there were those who came to the shop specifically to entrap me, trying to discern my political leanings. At that time, my political activities had dwindled significantly; in that era of arrests and crackdowns, few dared to take action.
However, an idea came to me. I began creating 'needle-punched slogans.' The method was this: I would place a piece of cardboard inside the bottom of a matchbox and write a slogan on it. Then, I would carefully plant needles along the lines of the writing and fill the entire space with epoxy glue. Once the glue dried, I would pop the mold out of the box. Now I had a stamp—one that required no ink or paint!
I would press this stamp onto banknotes. Tiny perforations created by the needles would be etched into the bills, though they weren't immediately noticeable. I mixed these bills with others and used them for purchases, allowing the money to circulate among the people until the slogans were eventually noticed.
I continued this for several months. One day in a coffeehouse, I pulled a bill from my pocket and quietly said to the person next to me:
— 'It looks like something is written on this bill.'
He looked closely but couldn't read it. When he turned the bill over, he realized it said: 'Long Live Banisadr.'
Others in the coffeehouse grew curious and asked what we

were looking for. I said:
— 'There are slogans written on some of the banknotes.'
They pulled out their own bills and checked them one by one. Interestingly, the next day, someone said:
— 'Have you heard? Some people have started punching slogans onto bills with needles!'
Gradually, the story spread everywhere. People began inspecting their change with more care. Each month, I would craft new stamps with fresh slogans and continue the process.
During those days, my brother Torab came to the shop. He said:
— 'I have forty thousand Tomans that I don't need right now. I'd like to lend it to you.'
Remembering my past experiences with him, I cautiously replied:
— 'No, thanks. I don't need it at the moment.'
He said: 'Well, you can use this money to expand your inventory and make a profit.'
Again, I thanked him and said: 'No, I really don't want to.'
Surprised, he asked: 'What a strange person you are! Are you refusing because you're upset with me?'
I said: 'No, I just don't see it as a necessity right now.'
He said: 'I'm going to Arak in two or three days and will be there for several months. I don't need this money for now, so let it stay with you as a trust (amanat).'
I replied: 'I have only one condition: this is strictly a loan. Whenever you need your money back, tell me one month in advance so I can sell my car and return it to you.'
He said: 'Agreed, it's just a loan.'
In the end, I accepted. It seemed there was no other choice; as if destiny had decreed it. Torab added:
— 'Whenever you decide to sell your car, let me know so I can inform the company. They are ready to buy it for use in the workshop.'
I agreed. Two or three days later, he left Rasht for Arak...

Constant Surveillance and Harassment by the Local Komiteh

It wasn't long before the local 'Islamic Association' began **breathing down my neck**. My shop was positioned just a stone's throw—barely 150 meters—from their headquarters. A group of neighborhood **loiterers**, sporting scruffy beards and scarves, constantly **prowled the area**. They made life miserable for the locals, acting as the regime's **eyes and ears**. Anyone who didn't **toe the line**—be they families of fugitives, supporters of the opposition, or simply those who didn't attend the mosque—could easily be hauled off to the Sharia judge and end up facing a **firing squad**.

They had even turned children into **informants**, coaching them to **snitch** on their own parents. Some of these kids were specifically assigned to **tail** me because they knew I sympathized with Banisadr’s ideology. The IRGC (Sepah) headquarters was also just around the corner, in a confiscated school next to the Russian Embassy. That school had been turned into a makeshift prison, and every day I saw the same faces shuttling back and forth between the mosque and the detention center.

In the midst of this, there was a girl who, I heard, had become the head of the women’s wing at the Sepah prison. I knew her from the early days of the revolution when we volunteered together in people's committees. Back then, she clearly **had a thing for me**; she would always give me these long, lingering looks. But a friend named Siavash, who was close to one of her suitors, asked me to **keep my distance** so the other guy could have a chance. Having no feelings for her, I promised to give her the **cold shoulder**. That rejection clearly **stung**. She eventually married that 'Hezbollahi' suitor, who went to the front lines a week after the wedding and returned in a **body bag**. This 'martyrdom' caused her **status to skyrocket** within the ranks. To my bad luck, she passed by my shop every single day.

Whenever I spotted her, I would quickly **duck inside** to avoid any eye contact.
One day, two members of the local 'Komiteh' came to my shop, claiming they had an urgent matter. I said: 'Go ahead.'
They asked: 'Do you know a woman named so-and-so?'
I said: 'No.'
When they gave me her description, I realized it was the same prison guard from the Sepah. I asked: 'Are you referring to the woman who was the head of the female wing at the Sepah prison?'
They snapped: 'Prison guard? What are you talking about! She is a fugitive **Mojahed** (hypocrite). If you spot her, report to us immediately.'
I knew right then they were **setting a trap** for me. I thought to myself: *If she's really a fugitive, she won't pass by here today; if she does, she's not a fugitive, and this whole story is a setup.*
Around 5:00 PM, I saw her approaching from a distance, just like every other day. I immediately pulled down the shop's shutters, headed to the mosque, and called out the head of the Association:
— 'Come outside, I need a word with you.'
He came out. With total gravity, I said: 'That fugitive woman is coming this way.'
At first, he said: 'Impossible.'
I replied: 'Just wait a moment, you'll see.'
Right then, she walked past us—indifferent, as usual. I said: 'Well? Why aren't you arresting this fugitive?'
He laughed and said: 'We suspected that "hypocrites" were frequenting your shop. Now we're certain that you aren't one of them.'
I replied: 'Look, I'm a shopkeeper. Anyone can walk in to buy something; whether they are Mujahedin, devout Muslims, or atheists. I care about their money, not their creed.'
He said: 'It is your **religious duty** to turn in the hypocrites.'
I retorted: 'Then please, give me a **blacklist** of all the hypocrites so I can personally send them your way!'
Every day after prayers, they would march through the alleys chanting 'Death to the Hypocrites.' If they

encountered someone who wasn't a mosque regular, they would stop in front of them and chant repeatedly to **send a clear message**. They asked me several times to attend the mosque. I said, 'Sure,' but I never went. They had even assigned informants to keep tabs on my customers.
Saeed—the same boy whose mother had asked me to stay away from so he could study—had now graduated and, **out of spite**, joined the Komiteh. His appearance didn't fit the 'Hezbollahi' mold at all. One day, several motorcyclists suddenly surrounded my shop. Saeed, dressed like a hardliner with a Palestinian kaffiyeh around his neck, hopped off his bike and entered the shop. He glanced around; I greeted him, but he ignored me and walked out. They did a few **intimidating laps** in front of the shop. The message was loud and clear: *You're dealing with us now. Watch your step.*
Saeed wasn't the same person anymore. One friend said he was collaborating just to get a background clearance for a job; another said he was after a **refrigerator coupon**. Even his father was upset by these associations. Around this time, I became friends with Ahmad, a local guy whose mother used to bring me tea while I was building the shop. Ahmad was unemployed. When the shop was quiet, I'd leave him the keys and go to the bazaar or visit Haj Isma'il's coffeehouse in Sagharisazan.
A few weeks later, I was sitting in front of that coffeehouse, across from the mosque and next to Saeed's father's carpentry shop. One of Saeed's friends, who had **fallen out** with him, sat next to me. I asked:
— 'Any news of Saeed?'
He said: 'I heard he quit the Komiteh.'
I replied skeptically: 'Getting into the Komiteh is easy; getting out is the hard part.
As we were talking, Saeed arrived and entered his father's shop. Right across from us was a small booth where the 'Komiteh' handled their 'cultural work'—which mostly meant recruiting teenagers for the war front. They constantly blasted elegies (*Noheh*) that never seemed to stop. I whispered to Saeed's friend:
— 'Watch this. I'm going to put Saeed to the test.'

As Saeed stood by the door, I said out loud:
— 'Unbelievable! Today is the martyrdom of Imam Ali, yet they’re playing a tribute to Dastgheyb: "He was torn to pieces, he won't return!" This sounds more like a pop song than a funeral dirge.'
Upon hearing this, Saeed bolted out of the shop and vanished. I told his friend:
— 'Saeed is still with them. You’d better head out; they might come looking for you.'
I returned to my shop and saw Ahmad with his hand bandaged. I asked:
— 'What happened?'
Looking embarrassed, he said: 'While you were out, I tried to open a tin of cherry compote. The lid sliced into my hand. I guess your holy ancestors (*Jed*) punished me for it.'
I laughed and said: 'My ancestors aren't sitting around waiting to punish someone over a can of fruit! Enjoy it. Eat whatever you want, even when I’m here. Friendship is worth much more than these things.'

If My Friend Hadn't Arrived on Time, I Would Have Been Executed

A few hours after that tense day, my friend Mohammad entered the shop. After the usual greetings, since he didn’t know Ahmad, he asked me to step outside so we could speak privately. As we walked, he told me that Mr. Banisadr had released an important statement and he had managed to get a copy. He was eager for us to duplicate and distribute it.
I said: 'But we don't have a photocopier!'
He replied: 'I’m friends with the son of a print shop owner; I’ve already made 150 copies.'
I told him: 'Give me half; I’ll give them to the customers I trust.'
He said: 'I’ll print more for your acquaintances, but I want

us to post these together. I've also prepared some large versions to wheatpaste on walls in crowded areas.'
I agreed and gave him some money to cover the printing costs. I took a bundle of fifty flyers. He added: 'I've coordinated with Mohammad-Ali. We're supposed to meet at 9:00 PM at a shop in Roobartan known for its good *Doogh* (yogurt drink).'
At about ten to nine, I entered the shop fully equipped. I had the flyers tucked against the small of my back. I had chalk sticks for graffiti hidden in my socks, adhesive tape, and a small stapler in my pocket. I ordered a *Doogh* and sipped it slowly, waiting for Mohammad and Mohammad-Ali to arrive.
Suddenly, two motorcyclists—one of whom knew me—pulled up in front of the shop and blocked the exit. The one who recognized me signaled for me to come over. There was no way out. In my heart, I recited: **'To God we belong, and to Him we shall return.'**
The moment I stepped down from the shop's entrance, he grabbed me by the collar of my overcoat and pinned me against the wall. Seething with anger, he said:
— 'I heard you've been talking.'
I replied: 'Talking about what? I'm not the type to run, and you know me.'
He snapped: 'You're lucky I know you; otherwise, I would have dealt with you differently.'
His partner hopped off the bike and said: 'It seems you don't understand plain language!' He turned to me and asked: 'Why are you scared? Don't you have anything to say?'
I said: 'Are you so terrifying that I should be scared? What is there to say?'
He replied: 'The **rubbish** you said about Martyr Dastgheyb. I know Saeed **snitched** on you.'
I said: 'You're mistaken. I said nothing wrong.'
He countered: 'We have a witness, and he doesn't lie!'
Knowing exactly what he meant, I said: 'Fine, bring him here to testify against me. If he does, I'll accept it.'
They knew Saeed wouldn't dare testify to my face. This only fueled their rage. One of them barked: 'I'll show you who

you’re dealing with!' The other ordered: 'Turn around, hands against the wall. We’re searching you.'
At that exact heartbeat, Mohammad-Ali arrived. He greeted them warmly. One of the motorcyclists knew him well; Mohammad-Ali was close to his family, especially since his older brother had been a fugitive supporter of the Mujahedin for a long time. Out of respect for that bond, the officer looked at me and said:
— 'You’re lucky you’re a friend of Mohammad-Ali. I’ve changed my mind about the search.'
They hopped on their bikes and roared off. I asked Mohammad-Ali: 'Where’s Mohammad?'
He replied: 'We saw from a distance that you were cornered. Mohammad took the flyers from me so I could step in and help you more easily.'
We caught up with Mohammad. He said: 'You should head home; we’ll distribute the rest.'
I replied: 'I’m no fair-weather friend. If we don't do this tonight, fear will be etched into my mind forever. We finish what we started.'
We distributed all the flyers that night and returned home. I couldn't sleep a wink. I kept thinking that Saeed might still have some twisted affection for me. In his mind, he probably imagined that if I were arrested, I’d repent and beg him to intervene; then he’d swoop in like a movie hero to save me, leaving me forever in his debt. He had no clue that if they had searched me, he would have had to visit me at the foot of the gallows!
Early next morning, I opened the shop. As I was pacing, Saeed’s father walked in.
— 'What’s wrong, Seyed? You look lost in thought.'
Surprised, I asked: 'What brings you here?'
He said: 'I had a customer nearby. I’m just off to buy some lumber. But why are you upset?'
I said: 'Because of Saeed.'
He asked: 'Which Saeed? My son?'
I replied: 'Yes.'
I told him the whole story—Saeed’s diploma, and the secret promise I had made to his mother. I told him that just last night, Saeed had sent his cronies after me. If Mohammad-Ali hadn't arrived to save me, I most likely wouldn't be

breathing right now.
Finally, I asked him to deliver this message to Saeed:
— '**Mansour says: If I had been caught that night, I would have been executed. I've heard they ask for your final wish before the execution. My wish would have been for Saeed to come and watch me hang.**'
His father was deeply shaken and left. Not a few hours had passed when Saeed entered the shop, his eyes streaming with tears. He hugged me, and we both broke down sobbing. He kept saying:
— 'Why didn't you tell me my mother said those things? Why did I repay your kindness like this?'
I said: 'Thank God it ended this way. If I had been arrested, your mother would have eventually told you the truth, and you would have lived with a crushing guilt for the rest of your life.'
He asked: 'How can I ever make it up to you?'
I replied: 'It will take time for our friendship to heal. If you try to quit the Komiteh now, it might cause trouble for you. It's better to volunteer for military service; it creates a natural distance.'
I also suggested we write to each other. I said: 'Let's correspond through letters during this time to rebuild our bond.' He agreed, and after a while, he left for his military service.

My Mother's Return Home Meeting a Mother Who Had No News of Her Son

My mother reappeared. She came by a few times, picked up some kerosene, and left. But after a few days, she returned for good. I was overjoyed that she had come back and wanted to live in our paternal home again. Just like the old days, she chose the room with windows facing the street, where she could keep an eye on the entire neighborhood.

Most of the time, she would sit there by the window, staring outside for hours.
A few days later, one of my cousins, who worked at a hospital, came to the shop. She asked anxiously:
— 'Do you know where your mother is?'
I said: 'Yes, she moved back home a few days ago and is living with me.'
She smiled and said: 'That’s great; I’m so relieved.'
I asked: 'Has something happened?'
She explained: 'Uncle Sarhang (the Colonel) asked me to help commit Auntie to a psychiatric hospital for treatment.'
She said she had coordinated with the hospital and even spoken to my mother about taking her there the next day.
— 'But the next day, I saw that Auntie had vanished.'
I replied: 'That’s interesting, because she had just taken some kerosene from the shop and left, but then she suddenly came back here.'
I told her: 'She’s doing fine for now. If any issues arise, I’ll let you know.'
She gave me her business card and left.
My shop had become a crossroad for many people. Anyone with a problem would come to me to unburden their heart. One of them was a mother who had heard nothing from her son for a long time; he was a supporter of the Mujahedin. Sometimes she came just to ease her heart by talking to me. Gradually, a close and human bond formed between us. She would say:
— 'You are like a son to me. When I talk to you, I feel at peace.
On a sweltering summer day, I was busy organizing stationery on the shop shelves when three teenagers, about thirteen or fourteen, burst in, looking frantic. They were soaking wet, water dripping from their clothes, and they stared at me with eyes full of grievance.
Even though I was certain the sun was out, I instinctively glanced toward the street to see what had happened to get them so drenched. But everywhere was dry and sunny; there wasn't a cloud in the sight. I turned to them, bewildered, and said:
— 'What happened? Did the sky just split open?'

One of them, the wettest and most agitated of the bunch, said resentfully:
— 'No, Agha Seyyed, the sky didn't split. We were just talking under your house window when someone dumped a bucket of water over us.'
Another boy added angrily:
— '**It was your mother!**'
I asked in shock:
— 'My mother?!'
— 'Yes, it was her.'
I couldn't believe it. Why would my mother do such a thing? I cursed the devil under my breath and prayed to God to help me get through the day peacefully. I told the boys:
— 'Stay right here; I'll bring you some towels.'
I entered the house through the shop's back door. I moved quietly toward my mother's room and peeked through the window pane. There she was... sitting right by the window. A bucket stood beside her, and she looked as if absolutely nothing had happened.

I entered the room, my voice trembling with rage:
— 'What on earth were you thinking?!'

She slowly turned her head toward me, gave me a brief look, and then fixed her gaze back on the window.
Her composure only fueled my anger. I moved closer and spoke louder:
— 'I’m talking to you! What was that for? Those kids weren't bothering you! Why harass them? Do you take pleasure in troubling others? What did they ever do to deserve a bucket of water over their heads? Why are you shaming me in front of the neighborhood? What do you want from me? What have I done to deserve this?'
Without uttering a single word, she lowered her feet from the chair, draped her chador over her head, and walked out of the house.
I felt a wave of nausea. Even though I had never felt a strong sense of maternal warmth from her, my heart ached. She looked so vulnerable, and she was, after all, my father’s trust. I knew that if I responded to her antics with cruelty, it would torment my father's soul. My late father used to lift his hands to the sky after every prayer and ask:
— 'May my wife be among the Houris of Paradise...'
I returned to the shop in a daze. The boys were still there. I realized I had forgotten the towels. I apologized and said:
— 'I’ll compensate you for any damage...'
One of the boys, who had always shown me great respect—or perhaps was a bit intimidated by me—said sheepishly:
— 'Agha Seyyed... I'm sorry.'
It was clear that my distress over my mother’s behavior had affected him too. Then it hit me why this boy always showed me such deference; an old memory brought the reason to light.
Early one morning, as I was leaving the house to open the shop, I saw him. He was carrying a bowl of votive soup (*Ash-e Nazri*) to a neighbor’s house. Joking around, I said:
— 'Give that soup to me; you’ll earn some spiritual merit!'
In a sharp, childish tone, he snapped back:
— 'Eat poison!' [Goft: Kooft bekhor!]
He then hurried away from me. I thought nothing of it and went to open the shop.
Not a few minutes had passed when his mother rushed into the store. She was gripping the boy's hand with one hand and holding a bowl of soup firmly with the other. Trembling

with fear, she placed the bowl on the counter and began apologizing profusely. She cursed her son, saying he was just a kid, he was ignorant, and begged for my forgiveness. She pleaded:
— 'Agha Seyyed, I swear by God, please forgive him.'
I looked at the boy's appearance; his clothes were covered in soup stains. I asked:
— 'What happened? Why are his clothes like this?'
The boy gave a bitter smile and tried to say something, but his mother cut him off, slapped him on the head, and said:
— 'Yeah, go ahead and laugh! Laugh now, because you'll be crying for yourself later!'
I told the mother: 'For God's sake, don't hit him. What's actually happened? Why are you so upset?'
With great embarrassment, she said: 'I gave him a bowl of soup to take to the neighbor. He came back home with dirty clothes and a broken bowl. He said you made a joke in the alley and he gave a rude reply. Right at that moment, he tripped and everything spilled...'
The poor woman was terrified. She insisted she wouldn't leave the shop until I had forgiven her son. I smiled and said:
— 'I swear I'm not upset. It was just a joke. I knew the soup was meant for someone else.
But his mother wouldn't buy it. She kept saying: 'This is a sign; I'm terrified something awful will happen to him.'
I said: 'Fine, I forgive him.'
It was like pouring water on a flame; she calmed down instantly. She said: 'Now I can go home with peace of mind. May God be pleased with you, Seyyed-jan. Here is the bowl of soup, enjoy it.'
And as she told her son, 'You got lucky!', they left happily. Since that day, the boy had held a special respect for me. Even now, with my mother drenching them, he felt he was the one at fault. He said with a smile:
— 'Don't worry, Agha Seyyed. It's sunny out; we'll go stand back under the window, and we'll dry off!'
About half an hour had passed, and my mind was still preoccupied with my mother's behavior when suddenly Ali-Reza, my female cousin's son, entered the shop. He said with a smile:

— 'Hello, cousin!'
— 'Hello, Ali-jan. Are you okay? Did you come here all by yourself?'
— 'Mom told me to come and tell you that Auntie [your mother] is at our house.'
I was stunned. I asked: 'My mother is at your house right now?!'
— 'Yes, cousin.'
I couldn't believe it. For years, my mother had cut off all ties with my father's relatives. On her orders, even we had no relationship with them; just a casual greeting if we crossed paths in the street. What could have happened to make her go to my cousin's house?
I said: 'Wait, I'm coming with you.
I closed the shop. I even forgot to hang the 'Back Soon' sign behind the glass. Ali-Reza and I headed toward my cousin's house. When we arrived, Ali-Reza rang the bell with a special code to let his mother know who was at the door. The door opened, and my cousin welcomed us with a kind smile. After a warm greeting, I said sheepishly:
— 'I'm sorry my mother has bothered you.'
She replied with a smile: 'What are you saying, cousin? This is your own home.'
I asked: 'Where is my mother?'
My cousin's gaze turned to one of fear and hesitation, as if she were afraid of my reaction. With a trembling voice, she said:
— 'Cousin... for God's sake, please don't give Auntie a hard time.'
It was clear that in this short time, my mother had said things that painted a distorted picture of me in her mind. And she had every right to believe her; with that innocent face and soft tongue, my mother could easily win over anyone's heart. I gave a reassuring smile to gain her trust:
— 'Don't worry, I just want to have a few words with her.'
'Are you sure?' she asked.
— 'Yes, I promise. Just tell me where she is.'
— 'She's sitting in the hall.'
I asked her to come with me. We entered the hall, and there she was. The moment she saw me, she shot a sharp look at my cousin, as if she were upset that she had called me. She

immediately stood up, pulled her chador over her head, and prepared to leave.
I stood firmly by the door:
— 'Who are you running from? I am your son, not your enemy.'
She replied with a stinging sarcasm:
— 'Oh, indeed... a son who takes orders from your brother and sister!'
I tried to calm the situation:
— 'Sit down, mother. I only want to say a few words.'
Reluctantly, she turned back and sat down. Her head was bowed, refusing to meet my eyes. I said:
— 'Why do you keep disturbing other people's lives? Why do you only share your troubles with the world, but never your joys?'
I paused for a moment before continuing:
— 'Why won't you look at me? What are you ashamed of? Is it because you never once gave me a sense of maternal love?'
I took a deep breath:
— 'I am no longer young, yet my heart still aches whenever I see a mother stroke her child’s hair with affection. You left a void in my heart—a longing for a mother I never truly had. Of course, I don't expect you to make up for those lost years now... it's far too late for that.'
I fell silent, then spoke softly:
— 'But you are my father’s trust (*Amanat*). That late man loved you so much that after every prayer, he would ask God to make you his *Houri* in the hereafter. Out of respect for him, I am willing to do whatever I can for you.'
She sneered:
— 'Oh, look at him now... starting with the "father, father" talk again.'
With a lump in my throat, I said:
— 'Why shouldn't I? He was the only one who ever loved me. You even took my father away from me. Only my name in his birth certificate was all I had left of him...
(After my father passed away, when we went to cancel his birth certificate, everyone was shocked to see that among his seven children, mine was the only name recorded in it.)

My mother said indifferently:
— 'Mine only has your name, too.'
I couldn't believe my ears. In front of my cousin, I said:
— 'If you lack anything or need something, just say it here and I'll provide it. I only ask one thing of you: don't ruin my reputation in this neighborhood. Let people believe that I, too, have a mother... this superficial comfort is enough for me.'
I stole a quick glance at my cousin. Tears were streaming down her face; her heart ached for me. Although I always tried my best not to cry in front of a woman, at that moment, I felt a deep pity for myself... and my tears fell.
My mother didn't like it. Coldly, she stood up, pulled her chador over her head, and left the house without even saying goodbye to my cousin.
I looked at my cousin. She was glad that my mother was returning to her home. I, too, was relieved that this ordeal had ended without a confrontation or trouble. I apologized to her for the trouble I had caused. She wiped her tears and smiled:
— 'Thank God it ended well.

My Mother's Complaint and My Arrest by the Police

I left the house in peace and headed home. I decided to ask my mother if she needed anything so I could provide it for her. I opened the door and went toward her room. I peeked through the window: the room was empty. Just to be sure, I opened the door and stepped inside... but there was no sign of her. I thought to myself: *She must have gone shopping, or perhaps to the mosque.*
I returned to the shop. The mother of one of the local boys—whose son was a Mujahedin supporter and had been missing for a long time—would occasionally come to my shop to unburden her heart. She used to tell me, 'You fill the void my son left behind.'

I greeted her. Seeing me, she was so overjoyed she nearly embraced me. She looked at me intently and asked:
— 'Are you alright, my son?'
I said: 'Yes, mother, I’m fine. What’s happened? Why the concern?'
She said: 'I came to see you and saw the shop was closed. You hadn't even put up the "Back Soon" sign. I thought you had gone inside for something, but you didn't come out. I got an uneasy feeling; I couldn't leave, so I stayed right here waiting for you to return.'
I looked at her worried face and found myself saying:
— 'How wonderful it is for someone to have someone who worries about them. Blessed are your children to have a mother like you.'
She gave me a deep look and said: 'I swear to God, you are the dearest person to me. I love you like my own lost son. Every time I see you, I forget that my son is gone.'
I opened the shop door and said: 'Come inside.'
She replied: 'I won't step inside until you tell me where you were and why you were late.'
I said: 'I went shopping.'
She asked: 'Then why did you come back empty-handed?'
I replied: 'They’ll deliver the goods by truck.'
But it seemed she didn't believe me. Finally, she entered the shop and said:
— 'I have a feeling you didn't go shopping.
e screech of tires. I turned to see a police car pulling up right in front of the shop. Two officers jumped out and stood at the entrance. Moments later, a woman draped in a chador stepped out of the vehicle, stood between them, pointed at me, and said:
— '**That’s him.**'
The officers acted as if they were cornered a fugitive killer. One blocked the door to prevent my escape, while the other reached for his handcuffs. His other hand rested on his holster as he barked:
— 'Don't move! Don't even think about running.'
I was in such shock; I had no idea what my mother could have told the police to make them treat me this way. I raised both hands to show I wasn't a threat and had no intention of resisting. As the officer was about to cuff me,

the mother of that missing boy suddenly threw herself on the ground, clinging to the officer’s legs. She was sobbing and screaming:
— '**I won't let you take this son of mine too!**'
A crowd of neighbors, drawn by the commotion, began to gather. Some shouted:
— 'We know this young man! There’s no need for handcuffs. He’ll go with you willingly.'
I stood there, dazed and speechless. I looked at my mother. Her head was bowed. She never dared to look me in the eye. Perhaps she loved me in some twisted way, but she was clearly ashamed of me. I turned to the grieving mother on the floor and said:
— 'Don't worry, mother. This isn't a political matter. **That woman... she is my mother.**
Upon hearing those words, she reacted as if struck by an electric shock. She let go of the officer’s leg, stood up, and charged toward my mother. My mother, terrified, scrambled to hide behind the policeman. The woman began hurling insults at her, letting out all the bitterness in her heart:
— 'Shame on you! Who files a complaint against their own flesh and blood? This boy is too good to have a mother like you!'
Again, I repeated: 'She is my mother.'
With a choked voice, she replied: 'Fine, I’ll be quiet. I'll stay silent. Forgive me, my son... but I won't let them take you! They’ll have to go over my dead body first.'
She had every right to feel this way; she had lost her own child and her heart was bleeding. The neighbors' protests eventually forced the police to back down from using handcuffs. They simply said: 'Don't even think about running. Just lock up your shop quietly and come with us to the station.'
I agreed. I turned to that grieving mother and said: 'Don't worry. It’s nothing serious. If you care for me, please go home and rest.'
I locked the shop and got into the police car. Through the rear window, I saw her; she hadn't taken her eyes off me. With a look, I reassured her not to worry—that what had happened to her son would not happen to me.

The police car drove toward the station...
We entered the station courtyard, and the officers led us to the duty officer’s room. My mother sat down. As I prepared to sit, the duty officer barked with authority:
— 'Who gave you permission to sit?!'
Without any preamble, he began insulting me:
— 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself, treating your mother like this? You’re lucky the law isn't entirely in my hands, or I’d kill you right here!
I turned to my mother and said:
— 'What did you tell him that made this gentleman pass judgment so quickly?'
Then, looking at the officer, I said:
— 'I thought a revolution had happened so that everyone would be equal before the law. You won't even let me speak.'
The officer asked: 'Do you have something to say?'
I replied: 'If you permit, I’d like to speak with you in private.'
My mother chimed in: 'Sure! Just him! It’s obvious he’s plotting something!'
The officer snapped: 'No! This is how it is. If you have something to say, say it right here!'
I said: 'Then I have nothing to say.'
Finally, they agreed to let my mother step out of the room for a few minutes. As she was leaving, she told the officer:
— 'Be careful he doesn't trick you!'
Once she left, the duty officer calmed down and said:
— 'Alright, now tell me, what’s really going on?

Commiting My Mother to the Psychiatric Hospital

I explained the whole situation to him:
— 'My uncle is an army colonel and a dentist. My mother had gone to Khorramshahr to stay with him. After a while, she went to the police station and filed a complaint, claiming my uncle’s friends had entered her room through

the ceiling and assaulted her. My uncle intended to admit her to the hospital in Khorramshahr for treatment, but she found out, fled, and came to Rasht. She stayed with one of her sisters, who also suffers from mental health issues.
My uncle then asked one of his nieces, who is a nurse at the psychiatric hospital in Rasht, to have her admitted and treated there. Everything is already prepared at that hospital. Here is her phone number; you can call and ask her yourself.'
The police chief, who until that moment had been full of threats and rage, softened his tone. Yet, he still struggled to believe she was ill, saying:
— 'But this woman seems more composed than you or me! What are we supposed to do now?'
I said: 'First and foremost, don't let her escape. We need to use some tact to get her into a vehicle and take her to the hospital.' I added: 'My mother loves me dearly. Tell her we need to take your son to a doctor to find out why he troubles you so much.'
As we were talking, a guard rushed into the room and told the duty officer anxiously:
— 'That lady has fled the station!'
The officer gave me a look that said, 'You were right; you weren't lying.' He then turned to the patrolman and ordered:
— 'Take the car and go with him to find his mother. Once you find her, take her directly to the hospital we discussed.
We got into the car. The driver took the wheel, and I sat in the back seat with another officer so my mother would believe I was still under arrest. As the car crawled through the Mesgar-ha neighborhood, I spotted her from a distance, walking calmly. I pointed her out to the driver. We pulled up beside her; I rolled down the window and said:
— 'You filed a complaint against me, and they've arrested me. They won't let me go until you give your consent.'
My mother told the officer: 'I have no complaint.'
I spoke again: 'They want to take me to the hospital. They think I'm ill, but you know that's not true. If you don't come and clear this up, they won't release me.'
She thought for a moment and asked: 'What should I do?'
I said: 'Get in.'

She climbed in. I locked the door so she couldn't bolt, and told the driver to waste no time and head straight to the hospital. We arrived and got out. My mother realized she had been **trapped** because the officers were now watching her more closely than me, but there was no way out. We entered the hospital together.
I went to the reception and asked the staff to notify Nurse Simin. I hurried back so my mother wouldn't notice my absence. A few minutes later, my cousin passed by us quietly, signaling that she was handling the paperwork.
After a while, the psychiatrist arrived and asked my mother to accompany him to his office. She went with him.
About twenty minutes passed. The doctor returned and said:
— 'I've spoken with your mother, but I see **no symptoms of mental illness** in her.'
Stunned, I asked: 'Are you joking?'
He replied: 'Why would I be joking?'
I said: 'Please, call my mother back in.
The doctor signaled the guards, and my mother entered the room. In front of the doctor, I said to her:
— 'The doctor says I'm fine and we can go home. Just please, stop saying that men came through the ceiling to assault you.'
Suddenly, my mother snapped:
— 'But they did! In fact, this man wearing the doctor's coat —he was one of them!'
The doctor stared, utterly stunned. He looked at me and said:
— 'It seems your experience in this matter outweighs mine.'
He pressed a buzzer, and several orderlies entered. The doctor noted: 'This lady needs rest.' He asked me to step out and wait.
The door opened, and my mother, now in a white hospital gown and flanked by two men, walked past us. Her gait was that of someone walking toward the gallows—dazed, defeated, her slippers dragging against the floor. Her perpetually innocent face looked more vulnerable than ever. As she passed me, her eyes seemed to scream:
— '**What have you done to me?**'

I felt sick to my stomach; I loathed myself. A voice inside me shrieked: 'Aren't you ashamed? Do you call yourself a human? By what right did you strip her of her freedom?'
Just then, Sina, a friend of my brother, walked in. Seeing my pale face, he realized something was wrong. 'What happened?' he asked.
My composure crumbled, and I sobbed uncontrollably. I said:
— 'Nothing... just a human-faced animal like me has robbed his mother of her life!'
Sina tried to comfort me: 'What are you saying? You've done a great service to your mother and your family.'
Through my tears, I cried out:
— 'But why me? I am the youngest in this family! Why did everyone step aside and leave this miserable task to me?'
It felt as though years of suppressed anguish were finally bursting forth. Even the patrolmen, seeing my distress, came over to console me: 'Why blame yourself? You did the right thing. We would have done the same in your shoes.'
They said their goodbyes and left.
My cousin arrived and, seeing I was not well, said:
— 'Don't be upset. We've given Auntie her medication; she has calmed down and is now asleep.'
She asked if I could provide some personal items for her—towels, a toothbrush, and toothpaste. She promised to stay by my mother's side and instruct her colleagues to take special care of her. I thanked her and headed back to the shop with Sina.
On the way, I asked Sina: 'How did you find out I was here?'
He said: 'I went to the shop and saw Ahmad. I asked him where Mansour was. He told me what he'd heard from the neighbors—the story about your mother throwing water on the kids and then going to the police station. I went to the station, and they told me you were here with her. I thought I'd come by to see if I could help.'
I thanked him. We were not far from the shop when I noticed that woman was still standing outside. Since I was inside the car, I saw her, but she didn't see me.
Sina asked: 'Do you need anything else? Do you want me to drive you back to the hospital?'
I said: 'No, I'll go myself.'

He pulled over in front of the shop. I got out. The moment she saw me, the woman approached with tearful eyes and threw her arms around me.
She said: '**Welcome back, my son.** Ahmad told me you took your mother to the hospital. I couldn't believe it. I was dying of grief.'
She hugged me again and said: '**I suffered so much during your absence.**
For the first time, I felt the true meaning of 'being in a mother's embrace.' It was as if all the exhaustion drained out of my body. Disbelieving yet filled with joy, I kissed her forehead and reassured her that no danger threatened me. I asked her to go home and get some peaceful rest. She said:
— 'Yes, my son.'
She promised to go, but her eyes never left me until the last moment. That moment felt like a dream: she was parting from her child, and I, after all these years, was tasting what it meant to have a mother for just a few seconds.
She left, and I entered the shop. Ahmad asked:
— 'What's the news? How is your mother?'
I could only muster: 'I'm exhausted. Can you stay in the shop? I need to rest.'
Ahmad said: 'Go sleep.'
I entered the house through the back door, went to my room, and collapsed onto the mattress I always kept spread on the floor, still in my clothes. I pulled the quilt over my head and wept like a motherless child. I cried so hard that I began to pity myself. I pleaded with God:
— 'Why did You deprive me of the blessing of having a mother?'
I thought to myself: 'If I had smoked a hundred pipes of opium or drunk all the liquor in the world, I wouldn't have been as intoxicated as I was by that woman's embrace. There was simply no comparison.'
Amidst my tears, I remembered my father and reproached him:
— 'Why did you leave me alone? Why aren't you by my side in these conditions?'
I begged him to reach out to me. Every night as I fell asleep, I would focus all my energy on seeing him in my

dreams, for I knew that in times of crisis, he always came to me.
I got up, washed my face, took a few deep breaths, and went back to the shop. I saw that same lady talking to Ahmad. Surprised, I said:
— 'Didn't you promise to go home?'
She replied: 'I did go, but I grew restless. I brought a bite of food for you as an excuse to see you again.'
I said: 'You’re putting yourself to so much trouble. I don't deserve this much kindness.'
She answered: 'I am taking pleasure in this, it’s not just kindness.'
I told her: 'I need to take some supplies to my mother. What do you think she needs? Please tell me so I can make a list.'
She was delighted that I had asked for her help. She listed the items one by one, and I gathered them from the shop. I said goodbye so she could return to her life, and I took the supplies to the hospital.
I saw my mother was still asleep. I asked the nurse: 'Hasn't she woken up?'
She said: 'Yes, once to go to the bathroom, but she fell back asleep. These pills are sedatives and sleep-inducing.'
She was in a deep, peaceful sleep. For the first time, I sat beside her with a sense of calm. Despite all the suffering she had caused me throughout my life, I never hated her; I always felt sorry for her.
That day, without anyone’s interference, I studied her face closely. There was a peculiar innocence in her features, but her inner self was filled with mistrust. I don't know what had caused her to be so cynical toward everyone. She always thought everyone was an enemy. She was troubled by others' happiness and seemed to find joy only when she caused them distress.
About an hour passed, but she still hadn't woken up. The nurse said:
— 'There’s no point in staying now. She won't wake up for several more hours. We will give these supplies to her.'
I asked: 'At what time can I see her?'
She replied: 'Around twelve to one in the afternoon, during lunchtime, she’ll be awake.'

From that day on, I visited her every day. She didn't talk much; her responses were mostly limited to a simple 'yes' or 'no.' Occasionally, an unconscious smile would flicker across her face. I had no choice but to accept this reality. Her world was different from mine; she didn't understand my world, and I didn't understand hers. I was only happy if I could believe there was no suffering or sorrow in her world.
A few days after my mother was hospitalized, an elderly man entered the shop and walked toward me. I recognized him at a glance; he was my father's friend. I remember one day when my father was very angry with me, this man walked in. After greeting my father, he asked:
— 'Why are you upset, Agha Mir-Hassan?'
My father pointed at me and said: 'This kid is driving me crazy; he troubles everyone.'
That man replied: '**I promise you, only this child will keep your lamp burning.**'
Now, he had grown old. When he saw my father's photo above me, he was delighted and said: 'May his soul rest in peace, and may you live a long life.'
He continued: '**I saw your father in my dream last night. He told me to tell you that he is always watching over you.**'
I was happy to hear this, but I told him: 'Why doesn't he come to my own dreams? Why must he use you as a messenger?'
He said: 'Perhaps he wanted me to come, see you in person, and then report back to him.'
He made a few purchases and left. For a few days, things continued in this manner.

The Traps Laid by the Local Komiteh

One day, a young man entered the shop. He glanced around as if searching for something or someone. Once he was sure we were alone, he walked up to me and asked:
— 'Is your name Agha Seyyed?'

I looked at him and said: 'My name isn't Seyyed, but since I am a descendant of the Prophet, everyone calls me that.' I asked: 'Can I help you?'
He said: 'Sadegh sent me.'
I replied: 'Sadegh? I don't know anyone by that name.'
He then mentioned the name of an old friend of mine; someone who had gone into hiding and whom I knew to be a supporter of the Mujahedin organization. I asked: 'Where is he?'
He said: 'The boys are in the forest. They're struggling with supplies. I've come for financial aid.'
I grew suspicious. I thought to myself that he might be from the IRGC or the local Komiteh—that this might be a **honey trap**. I smiled and said: 'If you were truly a supporter of the Organization, you'd know they don't use strangers for their communications. If I were a member or a supporter, I'd have my own channels.'
He left, looking dejected.
Two days later, he entered the shop again in the exact same manner. I said: 'You again?'
He replied: 'I reported your words to the higher-ups. They said you're a trustworthy man. This time, we don't want money; it's just a matter of trust.'
I asked: 'What kind of trust?'
— 'A handgun. We want you to keep it until one of the brothers comes to collect it.'
I gave a composed smile and said: 'Go tell them I have my own communication channels. I won't collaborate with you.'
He left and I never saw him again.
About a week later, a very young girl with a strict 'Hezbollahi' dress code was watching me from behind the shop window. I signaled for her to come inside. She entered and stood before me, looking shy and flustered.
I said: 'You've been staring through the window for a while; people might get the wrong idea!'
She said nervously: 'How much is that nail clipper in the window?'
I knew the nail clipper was just an excuse. Without looking, I said: 'Ten Tomans.'
She said: 'Alright, I want it.'
I picked up the clipper and gave it to her; the package was

marked twelve Tomans. I said: 'The price is actually twelve.'
She replied: 'But you said ten.'
I said: 'Fine, ten it is.'
She said coquettishly: 'I'll go get the money then.
The next day, she returned and repeated the same routine; standing behind the shop window and staring at me. Again, I invited her inside. Once she entered, I asked:
— 'Do you want to buy the nail clipper now?'
She was flustered and could hardly speak. I placed the clipper in front of her. Her face turned bright red. With great agitation, she said:
— 'I've taken a liking to you. Can we be more than friends?'
Her behavior struck me as highly suspicious. I asked:
— 'Do you even know me? This is the first time I've seen you. How could you have a crush on me so suddenly?'
She fell silent, unable to provide an answer. I said:
— 'I like you too, but I'm not in a position to get married right now. When the time is right, I'd prefer to formally propose to someone I love, rather than picking someone up off the street.'
I asked her: 'How old are you?'
She said: 'I'll be sixteen soon.'
I replied: 'Then you still have two years until you reach the **legal age**. Perhaps by the time you're older, I'll be in a better position to marry. I'm sure you'd be one of the first people I'd consider.'
She looked upset and said: 'But we need to get to know each other before marriage.'
I noticed a glaring **contradiction** between her words and her conservative 'Hezbollahi' appearance. I asked:
— 'Do your parents allow you to have a boyfriend at this age?'
She replied: 'How would they know? I'll tell them I'm going to Friday Prayers, and I can use that as an excuse to leave the house and be with my boyfriend.'
I told her: 'Give me some time to think about it. But please, don't stand in front of the window. Whenever you have business, just come inside.'
She left the shop looking resentful.
A few days later, I was standing at the shop door when I saw some of the local boys hanging out under the window. I

called one of them over. All three approached. I spoke to the one my mother had previously drenched with water:
— 'Can you do something for me?'
He looked excited and said: 'Of course, anything!'
I asked him to follow the girl and find out where she lived. They went off and eventually brought back her address.
Friday came, and the girl showed up again. I asked her:
— 'Which neighborhood do you live in?'
She gave me a false address. I couldn't tell if she was ashamed or hiding something. She said:
— 'It’s not good to talk here; let’s go inside your house and talk.'
I realized she was determined to get inside my home this time. I said:
— 'I’m not alone; there are others in the house.'
She then suggested: 'Then let's go to the City Park.'
I told her: 'I’ve thought a lot about it, and I’ve concluded that we aren't right for each other...'
She got upset and left in a huff.
After a week or two, she returned and stood behind the shop window again. Once more, I invited her in. She said:
— 'No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't forget you. I’m asking you to give me another chance.'
She insisted we meet on Friday, saying: 'If you talk to me, your opinion of me will change.'
I just smiled and remained silent, as I wasn't interested in anything but a formal marriage. She proposed meeting at the City Park this Friday at 2:00 PM. I stayed quiet. She said:
— '**Silence means consent.** So, I’ll see you on Friday.'
Friday arrived, and I went to the meeting spot. She was sitting on a bench. As soon as she saw me from a distance, she stood up and approached; she was almost about to hug me. I said:
— 'What are you doing?'
She glanced around and said: 'Don't worry, there's no one here.'
She asked me to go sit by the river at the far end of the park. I agreed, and we started walking toward the river when we saw a young couple rushing toward us. They warned us:

— '**Don’t go toward the river! The Komiteh members are lying in ambush there, arresting every boy and girl they find.**
We thanked them. But the girl insisted: 'Those are lies, there’s no one there, let’s go!'
I said: 'You seem to be in quite a hurry for the "brothers" to catch us and force us into marriage!'
She laughed and said: 'Even better!'
I said: 'Let’s go back to where you were sitting before.'
Reluctantly, she agreed. We sat back on the bench and started talking when two young men, one in a military uniform, walked past us. She looked at me and said:
— 'That boy is so handsome!'
I said: 'Yes, he is.'
She repeated: 'He’s very handsome, very.'
I replied: 'Alright, I get it, he’s handsome.'
But she wouldn’t let it go and said: '**He looks so much like Masoud Rajavi!**'
I stood up immediately and said: 'Congratulations to you then. I’m not interested in these games. Goodbye. We are not right for each other.'
I headed back to the shop, leaving her sitting there, motionless.
The next day, one of her friends, whom I already knew, came to the shop to apologize on her behalf. She asked me to speak with her again, but I had made up my mind. I told the friend:
— 'To be honest, I’ve taken a liking to *you*, not her.'
I knew she would report this back. She left.
Not two hours later, I saw her approaching from a distance, looking furious. I went inside the shop and prepared myself to end this once and for all. She was still just a child and was becoming a real liability for me. She burst into the shop and said angrily:
— 'What on earth did you say to my friend?'
I replied: 'Exactly what you heard from her.'
She started crying and said: 'I love you so much...'
I said: 'You’re a good girl, but I’m not right for you.'
She insisted: 'I know you are the one for me. I love you.'
I said: 'I’m telling you, I’m no good. If you think I own this shop, you’re wrong. I just work here.'

She said: 'I don't care about the shop; I want *you*.'
I said: '**I'm an addict, and I can barely afford my habit.**'
She replied: '**I'll wash people's laundry to pay for your addiction.**'
Seeing that she wouldn't give up, I lost my temper and shouted:
— '**What do you want from me? Leave me alone!**'
Seeing my state, she finally gave up and left. I never saw her again.
A few months passed until I ran into her by chance on the road; but this time, she had a completely different look—wearing vibrant colors and a touch of makeup. Seeing me, she smiled. I realized she held no grudge. I looked at her and asked:
— 'Have you staged a revolution?'
She replied: 'I've become beautiful, haven't I?'
I said: 'You were beautiful before, but you're even more so now.'
I asked: 'What brought about this change?'
She said: '**That path didn't work out, so I tried this one to see if it would.**'
I said: 'I hope you find happiness, but try not to play with people's emotions.'
She asked: 'I have one question.'
'What is it?' I replied.
She said: 'After we parted ways, did you ever date my friend?'
I said: 'No.'
She asked: 'Then why did you tell her that you liked *her*?'
I replied: 'Because I knew she would report it back to you, so you'd realize I wasn't the right man for you.'
I asked: 'Are you two not friends anymore?'
She said: 'No.'
'Why?' I asked.
She replied: 'Because I thought she lied just so she could be with you herself.'
We said our goodbyes. Seeing her made me happy; I was glad she hadn't lost hope in life. However, the local boys told me several times that they had spotted her at war martyrs' funeral ceremonies organized by the Sepah. She was also frequently seen at her local mosque.

I had heard that her parents were not well-off financially, and she was trying to get married as soon as possible to escape the situation she was in. Regardless, it all ended .well

Young Men Fleeing Poverty and Unemployment for the War Front

A few days later, Fereydoon entered the shop with a bag of clothes. After greeting me, he said:
— 'I've brought some clothes for you to sell for me. I'm heading to the front and I desperately need the money.'
He showed me the items one by one, saying, 'I only wore this jacket twice, and this one is brand new.'
I asked: 'How much do you want for these?'
He replied: 'If you want them for yourself, they are a gift.'
I said: 'You know they aren't my size, but I want to know the price if someone else wants the lot.'
He said: 'Three thousand Tomans.'
I handed him the three thousand Tomans and said: 'These are mine now.'
He looked at me and said: 'I'm going to the front, and it's unclear when—or if—I'll ever return. I don't want to be indebted to anyone.'
I replied: 'We made a fair deal, why talk of debt? Aren't you satisfied?'
'I'm afraid you'll lose money on them,' he said.
I reassured him: 'Don't worry, they're worth more than this.'
He reached into his pocket, pulled out a letter, and handed it to me. He hugged me and whispered in my ear:
— '**This is my will (last testament). I want you to keep it.**'
I said: 'You should leave your will with a close relative, not me.'
He replied: '**I have no one closer than you in my life.**'

I protested: 'What are you saying? You have a father, a mother, siblings, and the local Association.'
He said: '**My heart only aches for my mother. My father has left us with no dignity, and I couldn't be a provider for them. So, I decided to go to the front. By being killed, I can bring honor to my family and provide financial support for my mother.**'
I told him: '**This is suicide, not martyrdom.**'
He said: 'I have no other choice.' He asked me not to go on.
I asked: 'You said the Komiteh and Sepah wouldn't clear you for the front, so how are you going?'
He said: 'I'm going through the seminary students (Talabeh) of Qom.'
I asked: 'Are you a cleric that you're going with them?'
He replied: '**Through Haj Agha Ehsanbakhsh, the Imam's representative, I managed to register for the seminary.**'
They told him he must first serve six months at the front before he could begin his clerical studies. He said:
— 'I haven't even said goodbye to my own family. For now, you are the only one who knows.'
He asked me to deliver his will to Ehsanbakhsh, the Friday Imam of Rasht, if he were killed. I asked:
— 'Couldn't you find a better way to go on with your life?'
'No,' he replied.
We had nothing left to say. He gave me a look filled with despair and hugged me once more. He said:
— 'Forgive me; I troubled you a lot.'
He handed me his will—which, as was common, had been drafted by others—and said:
— 'I'm late; I must go.'
I said: 'I wish there was something I could do for you.'
'Forget it,' he replied, 'I have to leave.'
As he was stepping out of the shop, I called out:
— 'You forgot your clothes! Take them with you.'
He said: 'No, I sold them to you.'
I insisted: 'You know they are of no use to me. Take them; I'm happy for you to have them, and I know you'll return successfully.'
He said: 'No, they belong to you.'
I said: 'Then I will keep them here as a trust (*Amanat*) for

you. Pick them up whenever you return.'
He gave a faint smile and walked away.
Barely two months had passed when the news came: he had been killed. They said his body was at the Sepah headquarters. His funeral was to be held by the Sepah on Friday.

On Friday morning, I went with two friends to the Sepah headquarters to attend the funeral and deliver the will to Mr. Ehsanbakhsh. While waiting, I noticed a heated dispute between two local associations and the Komitehs. Each claimed the 'martyr' belonged to their district, fighting for the 'honor' of leading the procession.
I remembered how Fereydoon had pleaded with every single one of these associations to clear him for the front, only to be rejected. Now that his lifeless, lonely body had brought 'prestige,' they wanted to flaunt his corpse as a trophy of their neighborhood's devotion. By Sepah's mediation, a few representatives from each mosque were chosen to carry the casket.
Half an hour later, the casket—draped in the Iranian flag with a **clerical turban (Amameh)** placed on top—was carried out. This turban was a symbolic gesture to convince the public that clerics were not just clinging to power but

were present on the front lines; a piece of propaganda to silence critics. I noticed that almost everyone in the procession was a member of the Komiteh, Sepah, or mosque associations—the very people whose job was to entrap young men and ship them off to war.
We broke away from their ranks and walked along the sidewalks toward Municipality (Shahrdari) Square, where Mr. Ehsanbakhsh was set to give a speech. I approached his armed guards and told them I had a letter to deliver personally. One guard said, 'Give it to me, I'll hand it to Haj Agha.' I replied, 'This is Fereydoon Hamidian's last testament. He entrusted me to give it directly to Haj Agha. I cannot fail his dying wish.'
'What is your relation to the martyr?' he asked.
'None,' I said, 'Just tell Haj Agha; he knows who I am.'
After a full body search, I was led to the top floor of the Municipality tower. Mr. Ehsanbakhsh was sitting there with his guards. The guard pointed at me and said, 'He has Martyr Hamidian's will.'
Ehsanbakhsh smiled upon seeing me and told the guard: 'He worked very hard for the victory of the Revolution.' Then he said to me: 'Come closer.'
I approached, and he stood up. First, he asked how I was doing.
I said: 'I'm not well at all.'
'Why?' he asked.
I replied: 'That's a long story.'
I handed him the letter and asked to speak with him in private. He stepped a few paces away from his guards and said: 'Speak.'
I told him:
— 'Haj Agha, remember the days when you could walk among the people without bodyguards? You know better than anyone what the people gathered down there did to the owner of this will. Today, they were fighting over his corpse, each claiming this martyr as their own. The deceased told me that without your help, he wouldn't have been able to go to the front. My sorrow is that our goal for the Revolution was to value **how one lives**, not **how one dies**. You know well that now, in the eyes of the people, a person's worth is measured only by how they die. You told

your guard I was one of the revolutionaries. No, Haj Agha, I **am** still a revolutionary, and I remain loyal to its goals. I haven't surrendered to power, and I never will. I hope you too remain loyal to those goals and find the day you can walk among the people without guards again.'
He replied: 'There's an old saying: if the meat rots, you salt it; but woe to the day the salt itself rots. Right now, it's the salt that is rotting.'
The chanting ended, and it was time for his speech. I said my goodbyes, and he went to the podium to speak to the people about **how to die**. For a long time, I felt sick at heart for those who had closed all paths to life and were encouraging the youth to head to the fronts.
One day, I went to the bazaar to make purchases from the same merchant I'd known since my first day of shopkeeping. I handed him the shopping list. He gave it to his worker and, as usual, invited me to sit with him for tea. Suddenly, his phone rang. He picked it up and said, 'Hello, Haj Agha.' While listening, he was scribbling on a piece of paper. Finally, he said, 'We don't have cherry compote, Haj Agha; I'll send sour cherry instead.' Apparently, Haj Agha knew cherries were more expensive and insisted. The merchant stood his ground, jokingly saying, 'Cherry, my dear, it has to be cherry!' Then he conceded, 'As you wish, Haj Agha.'
He hung up and muttered, '**Poor people!**'
I asked, 'What happened?'
He replied, 'That was Haj Agha Ehsanbakhsh. He said we must send "public donations" to the front, and he gave me one week to prepare this list and ship it out.' Then he picked up the phone and began calling the merchants one by one, assigning them their 'quotas.'
He turned to me and said, 'You're lucky you made your purchase half an hour ago, because starting right now, the price of some goods must double.'
I asked, 'But why? Aren't they paying for these supplies?'
He laughed and said, '**The people are paying for it—by force, of course.**'
He advised me not to sell what I had bought that day and to return tomorrow for the new price list. If I sold them today at the old price, I'd have to buy them back from him

tomorrow at double the cost.
There were people whose entire job was to monitor these price hikes in the bazaar, then rush to small shops that were unaware of the new rates, buy up their stock at the old prices, and flip them for double the profit. And it was the ordinary people who had to endure the crushing weight of this inflation.

My Sister’s Marital Strife and Her Plea for Help

Amidst all that chaos, one day my sister, Nasrin, came to the shop. She started venting about her husband, saying he was mistreating her and she couldn't **stomach** living with him anymore. Despite having a child, she had made up her mind to get a divorce. She begged me to go to Tehran with her to help pack up her belongings and move them back to Rasht by truck.
I said, 'You have two brothers older than me; why drag me into this since I'm the youngest? Why not ask them for backup?'
She replied, 'My husband threatened that if your [older] brothers meddle in my life, he’ll **rat them out** [to the authorities]. You’re my only hope. He doesn't have anything on you to threaten you with.'
I told her, 'I’m worried about a **confrontation** breaking out; I’m not coming. Besides, I can't just **abandon** the shop.'
She insisted, 'We’ll head to Tehran Thursday night and be back Friday—it’s just a one-day trip.'
I went quiet, but she played her final card: 'I beg you, **by our father’s soul**, please come.'
I had no choice but to give in. The next day, we drove to Tehran and started packing. I hired a truck and pulled up in front of the house. I began hauling the boxes down from the top floor one by one, handing them to the driver to load up.

After we had loaded seven or eight boxes, her husband suddenly showed up. He didn't have a key because my sister had changed the locks, so he was locked out. I greeted him, but he just smirked and mockingly asked my sister: 'So, where are the big brothers? Too chicken to show up? You had to drag Mansour all the way here?'
My sister didn't give him the time of day and just told me: 'Let's keep moving the stuff.'
He stood in the doorway and barked: 'I'm not letting you take a single thing.'
I asked: 'What are you talking about?'
My sister said: 'Ignore him. This stuff is mine. Let's go.'
I checked with her: 'Are you sure all of this belongs to you?'
'Yes,' she insisted, 'every bit of it.'
I went back up with her, grabbed another box, and headed down. He blocked my path again: 'I said no.'
I told him: 'Masroor-jan, "no" isn't an option here. These belong to my sister and she has every right to take them. If you have a problem, go file a complaint at the station. I'm just helping out, I have no **ax to grind** here.'
I loaded the box and went back for more. This time, he pulled out a massive screwdriver to block me: 'I'm not letting you take this stuff.'
I said: 'Masroor-jan, I'm not looking for a fight. Go to the police. We're not running away.'
I asked a bystander: 'Where's the nearest police station?'
'Just two blocks up,' they replied.
I looked at Masroor: 'See? The station is right around the corner.'
'I know that!' he snapped.
As I struggled to load the boxes, I saw him stabbing at the truck tires with the screwdriver, trying to flatten them. The driver shouted: 'Looks like we've got trouble today! What are you doing to my rig?' Then he turned to me, fed up: 'Please, just take your boxes off my truck. I'm just trying to make a living; I don't need this drama.'
I told him: 'I'll cover any damages.'
I marched over to Masroor, grabbed him by the collar, and said: '**Get lost!**'
He threatened me with the screwdriver. I slapped him hard across the face and said: '**Now** go to the station and tell

them I hit you.'
He clutched his ear and stormed off.
Ten minutes later, he came back with an officer. 'I want to press charges against this man,' he said.
The officer said: 'Let’s go to the station.'
I unloaded the boxes from the truck and moved them back into my sister's house. I apologized to the driver and gave him some money for his trouble.
We headed to the police station with Masroor and the officer. A formal complaint was filed, and we were referred to the courthouse. The officer handed over the case file, and a hearing was scheduled for the next day. We spent that night at Masroor’s sister’s house, as she was on good terms with my sister.
I tried to act as a **mediator** to reconcile them, but it was no use. The next day at the courthouse, the hallways were packed with people arguing, cursing, and trading threats. One woman struck up a conversation with my sister. I quietly leaned into Masroor and said: 'Look around. Everyone here is broken. They’ve come and gone so many times they’ve become **armchair lawyers**. You’d better get your wife out of here fast, because if you stall any longer, this woman won't be much use to you anymore.'
Masroor snapped: 'Your sister needs to apologize to me.'
I realized he just wouldn't get it. I walked over to my sister's side.
The courtroom door opened, and they called our names. Both sides gave their statements. The judge asked me: 'What is your role in this case?'
I said: 'She is my sister; she asked for my help, and that’s why I’m here.'
Masroor told the judge: 'These brothers want to split my wife from me just so they can **get their hands on** her money.'
I countered: 'In all the time they’ve been married, I don’t recall being their guest even once. This man doesn't even cover the living expenses.'
The judge asked me to step out so my sister could speak for herself. As I was leaving, Masroor added: 'I want to press charges too—he got into a fight and slapped me.'
The judge said: 'Fine, you stay too.'

I admitted: 'Yes, I slapped him. And if I ever find out he laid a hand on my sister, I'll break his fingers.'
I told Masroor: 'If you're her husband, first you must rent a proper home. And since you want her to quit her job, you must provide financial guarantees before the judge. Also, you need to provide a medical clearance.'
The judge told him: 'You can't tell your wife not to work when you have no income of your own.'
Seeing that everything was **stacked against him**, Masroor signed a commitment not to harm my sister and promised to rent a house. They agreed that once his income became sufficient, he could then request her to stop working. They reconciled.
Knowing that their marriage was on shaky ground, I felt a sense of relief and asked the judge: 'So, where do I stand now?'
The judge asked Masroor: 'Do you still want to press charges against your brother-in-law, or are you ready to bury the hatchet?'
Prompted by my sister's insistence, he muttered: 'I'll drop the charges, but I'm not making peace with him.'
We navigated through the crowded hallways and exited the courthouse. I told my sister: 'I'm glad you two patched things up. They say a little bickering is the spice of life, but try not to overdo it. I'll say my goodbyes here and head to the terminal to catch a bus back to Rasht.'
I had only walked a few paces when I overheard my sister telling Masroor: 'Go and apologize to my brother. He dropped everything to come and help me.'
Masroor snapped back: 'Your brother slapped me in the face, and you want *me* to apologize to *him*?!'
Hearing this, I turned around and extended my hand to him. Masroor flinched, pulling back as if he thought I was going for another round.
I said: 'Relax, I'm not here for a fight. Give me your hand; I have a point to make.'
I took his hand, used it to lightly slap my own face, and said: '**Now we're even.** One from me, one from you. Now go and focus on your life. I have no interest in meddling; just go and be happy.'

I said my final goodbyes and headed for the terminal. I was bone-tired and preferred the bus so I could finally get some sleep.

My Friend Taking a Beating in My Place

I arrived in Rasht late at night. As I walked home, I noticed the shop lights were still on. I stepped inside and found Ahmad there. After we traded greetings, I asked, 'What's the word?'
Ahmad told me: 'Earlier today, around two or three in the afternoon, Saeed dropped by to see you. I told him you'd headed to Tehran. Then I said, "It's a good thing you're here; I'm starving. Let's go to my place and grab some lunch together." Saeed replied, "I've just eaten, I'm full. You go ahead, I'll be on my way."'
I told him: 'Just watch the shop for a few minutes while I run home to grab my food.'
But Saeed insisted: 'Take your time and eat in peace; I'll **hold down the fort** until you get back.'
I went home and was just starting my meal when my nephew called out, 'Uncle, come quick! There's a fight at the shop!'
I rushed over to find a crowd gathered and Saeed bruised up. At first, I thought he'd scrapped with a customer. I asked, 'What happened? Who did you get into it with?'
Saeed said: 'I was just standing in front of the shop when two of those self-proclaimed "Hezbollahis" approached me and started chanting, "Death to the fugitive hypocrite!"
I asked them: "What are you talking about? There are no hypocrites here."
They barked back: "We know your **boss** has tucked tail and run! You'd better watch your back!"

I asked: "Who’s my boss?" They replied: "The Seyyed who owns this shop."
I lost my temper and told them: "You’re the hypocrites for spreading lies and **framing** people!"
That’s when they jumped me, beat me up, and then **bolted**.'"
I had barely been home for a few minutes, and the exhaustion of the trip was still in my bones, but this news left me sick at heart. I told Ahmad, 'I’m going to find Saeed.'
I went to his father’s carpentry shop, but Saeed wasn't there. His father said, 'He had a splitting headache and went home.'
I went to Saeed’s house to comfort him. He was fuming: 'I swear I’ll kill them! They’re just making up cases against people for no reason.'
I asked Saeed to stay calm and come to the shop tomorrow to point them out to
The next day, Saeed arrived and waited for those two 'Hezbollahis.' He spotted one of them from a distance and pointed him out to me. I told Saeed, 'Hide behind the shop for now.'
I stood in front of the store. As the guy was passing by, I called out: 'Brother, a moment of your time, please.'
He stepped forward and asked, 'What’s the matter?'
I asked, 'Do you know the owner of this shop?'
With utter **nerve**, he replied, 'Yeah, he was a hypocrite (*monafeq*). He’s a fugitive now, and we’re **hunting him down**.'
I looked him in the eye: 'Why are you lying? You don’t even know who the "Seyed" is, because I’m the owner of this place.'
He didn't back down. 'Well, then you must be a hypocrite yourself.'
I retorted, 'I’ve just returned from my "escape," so go ahead —arrest me.'
He said, 'I’m going to the mosque to report this. If you’ve got the guts, stay right here until I get back with the brothers.'
I replied, 'No need to go alone. I’ll walk you there.'
We reached the mosque entrance. I told him, 'I’ll wait right here. Go inside and tell your boss to come and take me in.'

He went inside and returned with Alizadeh, the head of the Association. The young man pointed at me, but Alizadeh cut him off: 'Brother, you've got the wrong man. He is one of the respected shopkeepers in our neighborhood.'
The youth replied, 'But Brother, you were the one who assigned me to **keep an eye on** this shop!'
Alizadeh looked annoyed and told him, 'Go inside the mosque; I'll be there in a minute.'
Once he left, Alizadeh turned to me and said, 'A while back when you weren't around, our brothers noticed a "hypocrite" visiting your shop several times. Since you don't attend the mosque, the brothers don't recognize you. That's why our **greenhorn** here mistook your identity.'
I said, 'I wasn't the one mistaken; one of my friends took a beating in my place.'
He replied, 'I'll tell the brothers to **tread more carefully**.'
It turned out that young man was a new recruit to the local association, stationed there briefly to help with recruitment before being deployed to the front lines.
A few days later, that young man came to the shop. When we were alone, he said: 'I'm heading to the front tomorrow, and I've come to ask for your forgiveness (*Halaliyat*).'
I replied: 'I'll forgive you on one condition: tell me the truth. Did you really mistake my friend for me when you beat him?'
He confessed: 'I'm leaving tomorrow, and who knows if I'll make it back. One of the guys at the Association told me you're a *Seyed* and I should make peace with you before I go. But the truth is, Alizadeh himself told us you were a "hypocrite" and that we had to find a way to get your shop shut down. He even assigned guards to **stake out** your place from dawn till dusk and report back to him every day.'
After his confession, he begged for my pardon. I said: 'I forgive you, but I don't want you to go to the front.'
'My mind is made up,' he said. He said his goodbyes and left. I never heard from him again until the news of his 'martyrdom' arrived. The local Association became even more arrogant, **milking** his death for more influence.
God bless the patrolmen of the Shah's era compared to these!
One of the former members of the Association told me:

'Alizadeh, the head of the Association, was a **nobody** during the Shah’s time—a total loser the local kids used to bully. Now, he flaunts an overcoat and a watch to newcomers, lying that he took them as **war trophies** after killing Iraqis on the front lines. Many were duped by this scoundrel and headed to the front, kids who couldn't even tell their left hand from their right. When their bodies were brought back, Alizadeh would be the first to shoulder the casket, boasting about "another martyr from our Association." He turned their deaths into a **stepping stone** for his own power, while he never even set foot on a battlefield himself.'
Thus, these boys had to die so that the power-hungry could **cling to their seats**. The only 'help' the Association and the Komitehs gave these youths was drafting their wills, forcing them to write: "I went to the front by the Imam's decree and sacrificed my life for the Leader."
From the day Ayatollah Khomeini said, "My leader is that twelve-year-old child who blew himself up under Iraqi tanks," many elementary schoolers ran away from home to join the war. The local Komitehs were responsible for rounding up these children and sending them to the front to act as **human minesweepers**, clearing the path for the IRGC to advance.'
Hamid Houshangi, a veteran journalist and the man behind the legendary story of the 'boy under the tank,' recently passed away from cancer. From 1973, he was a key figure in state media and served as the deputy of the War Propaganda Headquarters during the Iran-Iraq conflict. In his final months, despite his illness, he faced a two-year prison sentence for political charges and was barred from leaving the country.
The most striking part of Houshangi’s legacy is his admission regarding **Hossein Fahmideh**. He revealed that after hearing about the death of a 16-year-old named Hossein, he and Morteza Avini decided to **embellish** the story to **ignite** revolutionary fervor among the youth. They fabricated the scenario of a 13-year-old strapping grenades to his waist and diving under an Iraqi tank. To their surprise, two days later, Ayatollah Khomeini echoed this exact story in a speech, calling the boy 'our leader.' After

the supreme leader's endorsement, they dared not **debunk** the myth.
Houshangi explained how they reasoned that 'war needs heroes' and how they set out to **manufacture** them. The legend became fact, and a manufactured narrative was sold to the public as absolute truth. But what was the reality? The real Hossein Fahmideh was a 16-year-old who was killed by mortar shrapnel. Everything else—the grenades, the tank—was **window dressing** created to sway public opinion.
Even Fahmideh’s parents were reportedly aware of the fabrication. It’s said his father once refused an interview on the anniversary of his death, and his mother’s subtle hints at the truth led to the family being **blacklisted** by state media. Military experts have also questioned the physics of the story. In 2017, Brigadier General Masoud Bakhtiari, a veteran army commander, dismissed the story as a tactical impossibility, stating: 'In war, people create myths like this, but it’s a flat-out lie that a child could blow up a tank with a single grenade.'
These myths served a grim purpose: they sent waves of children to the front lines to serve as **cannon fodder**, while the elite's own children lived in the lap of luxury.

My Mother’s Discharge from the Hospital and Her Return Home

I gathered some supplies and headed to the hospital to visit my mother. My cousin was on duty. I asked her: 'How is my mother doing?' She replied: 'The doctor checked on Auntie this morning and said she’s doing fine; there’s no longer any need for her to be hospitalized. You can take her home.' I said: 'My car is **acting up**; would it be okay if I come with the car tomorrow to pick her up?' She went to speak with the head of the ward and came back, saying: 'That’s fine, you can take her tomorrow.' I thanked her, but she told me: 'No need for thanks...

My cousin said: 'No thanks needed; she’s my aunt too.'
I stayed with my mother for half an hour and told her: 'The doctor says you’re doing much better. If you promise to take your meds every day, we can go home.' She nodded and said, 'Alright.' I said my goodbyes and headed back. I scrubbed her room clean and stocked up on essentials, getting everything ready.
The next morning, I brought her home. She didn't utter a word during the drive. Once inside, I settled her in her room and organized her medications in a basket. The first thing she did was perform ablution and pray; she was distraught over the prayers she’d missed. I sat in the corner, watching her pray. I felt a sense of peace and prayed to God that everything would turn out fine. After she finished, she pulled her chair to the window and sat on the ledge, watching the neighborhood go by. I told her: 'If you need anything, just ask.' She replied: 'No, I’m fine.' I said: 'I’m heading to the shop then. If you need anything, call out, or ask Ahmad if I’m not around.' Since the shop was attached to the house, it was easy for her to reach me.
Things were going smoothly for a while. My mother started going to the mosque and made a few friends. Gradually, my brother Torab returned from Arak. He stayed at my sister’s place, feeling more 'at home' with her husband, but he’d drop by the shop. Soon, the house became a **revolving door**. He’d bring friends through the back door of the shop into the house. Before I knew it, the **opium pipe and brazier** (*Manqal o Vafoor*) were laid out, and a colorful cast of characters started showing up—many of them my brother-in-law’s 'smoking buddies.' They took pride in lounging at his place, filling the house with smoke.
I suspect it was my brother-in-law’s scheme to **offload** some of them since his own place was getting too crowded. These men would walk into my shop politely, greet me, and slip through the back door. An hour or two later, completely **high**, they’d emerge, wipe the coal dust off their faces, and greet me again out of habit. Eventually, the brother-in-law himself started showing up. Luxury cars began lining the curb near my shop. They’d even ask me to **keep an eye on** their cars so they wouldn't get keyed or ticketed. They used my shop as a **front**, making it look like

they were customers, while they were actually slipping into my home for their fix.
Whenever a new guest arrived for my brother, he'd go out to welcome them and introduce them to me with misplaced pride: 'This is Engineer so-and-so,' or 'The gentleman who just went inside is the Deputy Mayor.' I didn't know if the other one was a bank manager or not, but he had essentially turned our home into a **high-level boardroom**! Every day they'd gather around the opium brazier, 'solving' the world's greatest political, social, and economic crises—only to return the next day and solve the exact same problems all over again, as if they'd forgotten they'd already fixed the world the day before.
My poor mother, recently discharged and desperate for peace, was the real victim. Every time she stepped out of her room to use the bathroom or perform ablution, she'd run into one of these 'mayors' or 'bank managers' lounging in their underwear. She became a **prisoner in her own room**, muttering complaints under her breath about the state of things.
I was already under the **constant surveillance** of the local Association, and now I lived in terror that they'd raid the house and I'd be branded as the owner of an **opium den**. The situation was becoming **unbearable**. But because he was my older brother, I couldn't bring myself to be firm with him. Every time I was on the verge of a confrontation, I'd remember the fortune-teller's warning about a feud over our father's inheritance, so I bit my tongue and held back.
This continued until one day, after his friends had left, he came into the shop and started 'joking' with one of my best customers. He was clearly **stoned out of his mind**. He went as far as hugging and kissing the man, making him extremely uncomfortable with his inappropriate antics. The customer, fed up, looked at him and said: 'If you can't handle your high, maybe you should smoke less.'
My brother, figuring it was two against one, crossed the line and insulted him. The customer looked at me, sighed 'I'm sorry,' and walked out. But my brother showed no remorse. He repeated this behavior with several other customers, barging into the shop whenever he was high and alone to cause trouble.

One day, I calmly said to him: 'This is a place of business.' He snapped back: 'So what?' I said: 'From now on, please ask your friends to use the main house entrance, not walk through the shop.' He retorted: 'This is my father's property too.' I replied: 'I'm not saying it isn't, I'm just asking that your friends don't cut through the shop.' He doubled down: 'This is our family home, and it's none of your business to tell me what I can or can't do.'
I didn't push it any further because I still owed him money, and business was actually booming. Sales were great, and I had started buying my inventory in cash. I told him: 'I want to sell my car and pay you back.' He said: 'I don't need the money right now.' I insisted: 'Regardless, I'm selling it. Check if your boss still wants me to bring the car to Tehran. If not, I'll just put it on the market.'
He asked: 'How much are you looking to get for it?'
I told him: 'The current market price.'
He said: 'Once you've **done your homework** on the price, let me know, and I'll call the company.'
The next day, I got the car tuned up, checked with a few **car dealerships** to get the **market value**, and informed my brother. He then called his boss—who was also a close friend of his—and confirmed that the company wanted the car.

If it weren't for my uncle-in-law, I would have been executed.

I told Ahmad, 'I'm heading to Tehran to sell the car. Can you handle the shop alone for a day?' He said, 'Sure.' Early the next morning, I drove to Tehran in my Citroën Diane. I didn't want to stay with my older aunt—the one I used to join in protests with her son during the Revolution. I'd heard she had become a **hardline regime loyalist** (Hezbollahi) and had been appointed Deputy Minister of Industries. She also knew I supported President Bani-Sadr's political vision. So, I went to my younger aunt's house; her husband didn't care for the fundamentalists

either. I think he was a sympathizer of the **Fedaian Khalq** (a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla group).
As luck would have it, when I arrived, my older aunt was already there. Soon, her son Mahmoud pulled up on his motorcycle. This was shortly after the **Hafte Tir bombing** (the explosion at the Islamic Republican Party headquarters). He greeted me, then sat by the phone and started making calls. From what I gathered, his university friends who shared his ideology now held positions in government agencies across various cities. They were hunting down former classmates who held different views. I heard him say into the phone, 'Do you remember so-and-so from Kashan who used to argue with us? Any news on him?' He was telling them to track him down. He was **betraying** his university peers one by one.
I was talking to my younger aunt's husband, and he signaled to me as if to say, 'Look at what this traitor is doing.' Mahmoud's mother told him, 'Mahmoud dear, hang up the phone, your cousin Mansour is here.' He was forced to hang up, greeted me again, and asked, 'What's the news from Rasht?' I replied, 'You know Rasht is no different from Tehran. The Revolution has been hijacked. It has fallen into the hands of reactionaries who are sending the **children of the Revolution** to firing squads day and night.'
He flew into a rage: 'Are you blind? These criminals blew up the Party headquarters, killed **seventy-two** of our finest leaders, and put the whole nation in mourning!'
'I am also sorry they were killed,' I countered, 'but why do you only say seventy-two? Were the others not human beings that you don't count them?'
'Which others?' he snapped.
'The Revolutionary Guards and bodyguards killed in that same building,' I said. 'There were more than thirty or forty of them. What is the difference between a guard and a member of parliament? You are trying to **mythologize this as the Battle of Karbala**. How do you even know who was behind the bombing? You execute young people with such cruelty, and then you claim the people are in mourning! In this **reign of terror** you've created, does anyone even dare *not* to wear black?

He jumped up and headed back to the phone. Grabbing the receiver, he snarled, 'I'll show you.' My uncle-in-law rushed over, snatched the phone out of his hand, and barked, 'What do you think you're doing? Mansour is *my* guest.'
'Fine,' Mahmoud snapped at him. 'Since he's your guest tonight, I'll leave him be for now. But I'm leaving.' He moved toward the door, but his mother grabbed his leg, pleading with him: 'Mahmoud, Mansour is your cousin! He's our guest. You're killing me with this—leave him alone!'
At that point, I didn't care what happened next. I told his mother, 'Auntie, don't beg him. He'd trade a hundred people like you for a single hair of Khomeini.'
That set him off even more. He wrenched his leg from his mother's grip and bolted for the door. But my uncle-in-law blocked his path, staring him down with pure rage. 'You'll have to step over my dead body before you take Mansour out of this house,' he said firmly.
Mahmoud realized the situation wasn't in his favor. His mother continued to cry and pleaded with me to stay silent. I said, 'I'll be quiet only for your sake.'
He reluctantly turned back and sat down. My uncle-in-law told me to go upstairs and get some sleep. A few minutes later, he came up and whispered, 'That madman plans to have you arrested the moment you step foot out of this house. You have to leave early tomorrow before he wakes up. Sleep now; I'll wake you myself.'
At the crack of dawn, he woke me. 'Mahmoud is still asleep. Now is your chance.' I got dressed, and we quietly crept out of the house. He told me, 'Get behind the wheel but **don't start the engine**. I'll push the car down the street so he doesn't hear the motor.'
He pushed my car until I was clear of the alley. I thanked him, he told me to stay safe, and after saying our goodbyes, I headed toward the company. I parked the car nearby and walked around until they opened, eventually finding a small teahouse where I grabbed some breakfast.
When the office opened, I handed over the car. We agreed on a price. The manager said, 'I don't know what it is, but I've really taken a liking to your car.' I replied, 'I hope it brings you better luck than it brought me; I didn't see much good from it.'

He looked surprised. 'What do you mean? All those months you were in Arak and your brother was running the workshop, he sent us monthly invoices for car rental, servicing, fuel, and oil—and we paid him every time. We have all the receipts. That's actually why we decided to buy it; it's cheaper for the company this way.'
Then he asked, 'Didn't your brother give you the money he was collecting for the car?'
'Oh, yes... he did,' I lied.
'Since the company owes your brother money anyway,' he continued, 'do you mind if we settle the payment for your car through him?'
'No,' I said, 'that’s fine.'
It was only then I realized my dear brother had been charging the company for my car while I had been paying every single expense out of my own pocket the entire time. I handed over the keys and the registration and headed to the North Terminal. I bought a bus ticket and was pacing around the terminal waiting for departure. Suddenly, someone came up from behind and pressed their hands firmly over my eyes, squeezing hard. I thought to myself, 'To God we belong and to Him we shall return'—it’s over. I’m dead.
I assumed it was my cousin Mahmoud and his Revolutionary Guard friends coming to arrest me. I yelled, 'Okay, I surrender! You’re blinding me!'
But then, he started kissing me. When he took his hands off my eyes, I realized it wasn't my cousin at all. It was a supporter of the **Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK)** who had fled Rasht and was hiding in Tehran. He was terrified too. Ironically, he was the brother of the same guy on the motorcycle who had tried to arrest me in front of the yogurt shop—the friend of Mohammad-Ali, the **Komiteh** member who was obsessed with hunting down MEK members. This one was a supporter, running for his life from people exactly like his own brother.
I told him, 'You hadn't even committed a crime; why did you run? By going into hiding, you've created a case against yourself.'
He replied, 'My brother sent a message saying that if I turn myself in, he can help me.'

'Your brother is delusional,' I said. 'Once he hands you over to the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), even he won't be able to do a thing for you. You shouldn't have fled in the first place, but now that you have, I'm not sure if surrendering is the right move. Wait a while until this **execution machine** grinds to a halt, then turn yourself in.'
He leaned his head on my shoulder and broke down in tears. 'I miss my parents so much,' he sobbed. 'I know they've suffered because of me. I heard my father had a stroke.'
I promised him that I would talk to Mohammad-Ali, so he could speak with his brother and let him know when things had calmed down enough for him to safely surrender.
'Get away from here as fast as you can,' I warned him. 'If my cousin sees you with me, he'll issue our death warrants right here and carry out the execution himself.'
My bus was ready to depart. He said his goodbyes through tears. I boarded the bus and began my journey back to Rasht.

My Brother's Harassment and My Mother's Flight from Home

"When I entered the house, I found my brother sitting around a brazier with his friends, smoking opium. After a brief greeting, I went to my mother's room, but she wasn't there. I went to the shop and asked Ahmad, 'Have you heard from my mother?'
Ahmad whispered, 'Your brother and mother had a fight yesterday.' When I asked why, he continued, 'Your mother had come out of her room to perform ablutions when one of your brother's friends walked out of the room wearing nothing but his underwear. Your mother protested, set the water pitcher down in frustration, and retreated to her room. This upset your brother, who told her, "You're acting crazy again." She snapped back, "You're the crazy one!" In a rage, your brother poured the pitcher of water over her

head and shouted, "If you skip your prayers for just one day, you'll go to hell!" Two of his friends had to pull him back into the room. Your mother put on her chador and walked out of the house.'
A lump formed in my throat. I told Ahmad, 'While my mother was in the hospital, my brother didn't visit her even once. And now, he's destroying everything I've worked for.' I thought to myself, 'What's the use? This damn opium leaves a man with no **sense of honor**. They see everything through the hole of their pipes.' It was **back to square one**. I had to prepare myself for a new set of circumstances.
The next day, I told my brother, 'I handed the car over to your friend, and we agreed he'd settle the payment with you. I don't owe you anything anymore.' He insisted he didn't need the money and told me to keep it. I told him I didn't need it either.
'What are you trying to say?' he asked.
'I'm not "trying" to say anything,' I replied. 'I just don't owe you a dime, and I want to lock the back door of the shop that leads into the house so your friends stop using it as a shortcut. If they want to see you, they should ring the front doorbell so you can let them in yourself.'
'Are you giving me orders?' he snapped. 'This is our father's property.'
'I'm not giving you orders,' I said. 'See whoever you like, but I don't want anyone but us entering the house through the shop.'
'Just go,' he muttered. 'I don't have the patience for an argument, and you can't stop my friends from coming and going.'
The fortuneteller's words flashed through my mind again. To prevent the prophecy from coming true, I **swallowed my pride** and walked away from the confrontation. He had realized by then that I was unwilling to fight back.
One day, feeling exhausted while Ahmad was managing the shop and things were quiet, I told him, 'I'm going to get some rest.' I went into the room and lay down. There, I saw a friend of my brother-in-law—a retired bank manager who now ran a hardware store—sitting around the brazier with another friend, smoking opium. They looked up, pleased to see me, assuming I wanted to join them. I excused myself,

saying, 'I’m just tired and came to rest for a bit.' I headed to the bedding in the corner, but their chatter made sleep impossible.
Pinned there by their noise, I found myself listening to their conversation. The retired banker was venting about his wife. 'I provided everything for her,' he lamented. 'I bought my children things their peers had never even seen. But my wife turned them against me. She pressured me to put the house in her name. To reassure her, I agreed, went to the notary, and transferred the title.'
He continued, 'When I got home, I tried my key in the lock over and over, but it wouldn't turn. I had to ring the bell. My wife opened the window and said, "The problem isn't the key—it's you. You haven't realized yet that you don't belong here. Go live with your junkie friends." I lost my temper and shouted, but she told me, "Lower your voice or I’m calling the police." When I asked to at least grab some clothes, she said, "We already took your things to your father’s house." I had no choice but to go there, and I’ve been living with him for a few days now.'
'My father has been driving me crazy,' he added. 'He still treats me like a toddler. No matter what I do, he says, "Be careful, don't break that!" He picks on me every day. I tell him, "Dad, I’m a grown man with a wife and kids," and he just snaps back, "If you have a wife and kids, what are you doing here?" I’m trapped in a nightmare!'
'To top it off,' he sighed, 'I heard yesterday that my eldest son wants to go to Qom to become a cleric. The boy is brilliant, his grades were top-tier, and he used to despise the clergy.'
The next man handed him the opium pipe and said, 'Your turn.' He then began sharing his own family woes in sympathy. 'If my father finds out I’m smoking opium, he’ll ruin me,' he said. 'Everything I own belongs to him. I’m constantly terrified of what will happen if my addiction is exposed.'
My brother smirked at them and said, **'I guess I’m luckier than both of you. I don't have a wife to change the locks, nor a child who wants to become a cleric. And as for my father—he’s been dead for years.'**

Realizing sleep was out of the question, I got up, sat beside them to have some tea, and then headed back to the shop."

Helping My Brother Turaj and His Friends: A Lesson for the Retired Banker

The retired bank manager looked at my brother and said, "We've been talking so much that we didn't let your brother get any rest."
My brother replied, "He's not just a brother; he's a **shining light**—as reliable as a full moon."
The manager then turned to me and asked, "Did you hear what we were discussing?"
"Yes," I replied, "I heard everything."
"I beg you, in the name of God," he said, "don't tell a soul."
My brother answered for me: "Mansour is the keeper of my secrets. He hasn't breathed a word about what happens in this house, not even to our own family."
The poor soul didn't realize that the entire family already knew he was an addict and that no one placed any stock in what he said anymore.
The bank manager said to me, "You're young, not much older than my eldest son. Can you tell me why a boy who always mocked clerics has suddenly decided to drop everything and join the seminary?"
"You are my brother's friend," I said. "If you were *my* friend, perhaps I would answer you. I don't meddle in people's private lives."
"Please," he insisted, "speak to me as a friend. I would be grateful to know your perspective."
"My answer might upset you," I warned.
"I promise it won't," he assured me.
I glanced at my brother and asked, "Should I tell him?"
"Go ahead," my brother said. "Be honest, it's fine."
I looked at the manager. "You said you provided everything for your wife. But she already had those things at her

parents' house. What she wanted was a husband—a man of the house—and she didn't have one. You should thank God she didn't betray you."
My brother grew uneasy and snapped, "Show some respect to your elder!"
But the bank manager stopped him. "Let your brother continue." After a moment of silence, he turned back to me: "Don't be upset. Please, go on."
"Your son also had everything," I continued, "except a father. A father who would give him time, listen to his needs, and answer his questions. Young people have many questions. If someone provides answers, they are drawn to them. He likely had religious questions that you couldn't—or wouldn't—answer convincingly; maybe you even mocked him. One of his religious friends probably filled that void and encouraged him to become a cleric. He is searching for the **spirituality** he lacks, and he thinks the seminary is the only way to find it.
I fell silent and headed back to the shop. Half an hour later, my brother called out to me. 'What is it?' I asked.
'Come upstairs,' he said. 'We need to talk.'
I went back to them. It turned out that after I had left, they had consulted each other and decided to quit. I couldn't believe it! Had my words really carried that much weight?
'Will you help us?' they asked. 'Will you help us find our way back to the arms of our families?'
I promised that if they followed through, I would do everything in my power to support them.
I left them to it and returned to the shop. As evening fell, my brother’s friends departed. He came down to the shop and said, 'At first, I was deeply offended by what you said. It felt like you hit that poor man with a **sledgehammer**. But after thinking about it, I realized a sledgehammer was exactly what we all needed.'
'So,' I asked, 'what’s the plan?'
'They’ve gone to tell their families they are going on a short trip,' he explained. 'They’re packing some things and coming back here so we can **lock ourselves away** and kick this opium habit once and for all.'
'How can I help?' I asked.

'Your job,' he said, 'is to bring us food from the local kebab house every day and arrange for the local medic to come by and give us our injections to manage the withdrawal.'
I agreed and pulled him into a hug. 'By doing this,' I told him, 'I finally get a brother too.'
The next day, they arrived one by one with their travel bags. Every day, I brought them meals and ensured the medic came to administer the shots, hoping to ease their pain.
A few days passed. They told me they no longer needed the medic and wanted to start drinking a bit of alcohol to 'flush the opium from their systems,' though they remained confined to the house. I continued to provide everything they needed.
During this time, my mother would occasionally slip back into the house, take some of our rationed kerosene, and head back to her sister's. I never used government coupons myself; I bought everything at market price.
Eventually, they decided it was time to return to their families and pretend they had just come back from a trip. The day after they left, both men returned to our house. I headed upstairs, heartened and eager to see them, only to be met with a sight that left me speechless: the brazier and the opium pipes were laid out once again.
'So, you were just mocking me this whole time!' I said, my voice thick with disappointment.
The bank manager looked up. 'I went home, and that very first night, I got into a massive fight with my father. I realized my nerves are shot. If I don't smoke, I'll be fighting every single day. The opium is the only thing that calms me down.'
His friend chimed in, 'Last night, my wife tore into me. She complained that my sexual drive had plummeted and accused me of overindulging on my "trip." I swore to her, "I swear to God, there was no other woman. I used to smoke opium, but I've quit now. I'm clean."'
He continued, 'But she just said, "I don't care what you were doing before, I want the man you used to be."'
Then my brother spoke. 'Our tolerance had gotten too high,' he admitted. 'No matter how much I smoked, I couldn't get high anymore. I only "quit" to flush the toxins out of my

system so that now, even a small amount will get me high again.'
I heard them loud and clear: they had played me. They never wanted to quit the drug; they just wanted to quit the tolerance.
I lost all hope in them. My mother was effectively homeless, wandering from place to place.
A few days after this ordeal, my sister **Roxareh** came to the shop. She took one look at me and saw the weight of the world on my shoulders...

She asked, 'What's wrong? Why do you look so miserable?'
I poured my heart out to her, recounting the whole saga of my brother and his friends' supposed 'rehab.'
She laughed. 'You're so naive! People like them never quit. My husband has been smoking opium for twenty years, and he still claims he isn't an addict—he calls it "recreational"! Yet, he can't go a single day without it.'
'But he's made himself my partner,' I complained. 'Every day, he dips into the cash register to buy his opium. All my hard work literally goes up in smoke. This is the exact same nightmare he put me through in Arak—the one I tried to escape—and now it's happening all over again. He spends

his days by the brazier and his nights high, blasting music while he boils down the opium residue to extract the juice (Shireh). He’s even happy when others come over to smoke because he gets to keep their leftovers. Meanwhile, I’m the one suffering until dawn from the loud music—which he sings along to—and the foul stench of the boiling opium. What kind of fate have I been cursed with?'
My sister looked at me firmly. 'You need to be clever, like me. You have to look out for your own future.'
'What should I do?' I asked.
'Start setting aside a portion of the daily earnings for yourself,' she advised. 'Build a safety net. Otherwise, you’ll spend the rest of your life working just to fund his addiction.'
Her words made sense. Just then, my brother walked into the shop in his pajamas to grab some canned cherries. Seeing my sister there, he greeted her. She asked, 'Is my husband here?'
'No,' he replied. He then grabbed a large bag, filled it to the brim with nuts and sweets, and handed it to her for the kids.
When she reached for her purse to pay, he waved her off. 'Don't be ridiculous! Put your money away. Take whatever you want.'
My sister said her goodbyes and left. My brother picked up two cans of cherries and headed back inside.
The next day, I confronted my brother. 'You take whatever you want from the cash register as if you’re a partner,' I said, 'even though I don't owe you a single dime.'
'Of course I’m your partner,' he replied casually.
'But you said you didn't need that money,' I reminded him. 'I only kept it as a deposit.'
'Regardless,' he argued, 'you used that capital for the business.'
'I paid you back!' I countered.
'And I told you I didn't need it,' he insisted, circling back.
'Fine,' I said, trying a different tactic. 'At least get the money for the car from the company so I can restock the shop and increase our sales.'
He agreed and brought the money the very next day. It turned out the company had deposited the funds into his

account just days after I delivered the car, but he hadn't said a word to me. I took the money and immediately used it to expand the shop’s inventory.
One day, I accompanied a friend who wanted to go to the **Basij office** to pick up his egg rations. When we entered the distribution room, there was a line, so we joined it. Suddenly, I realized the young man sitting behind the desk was someone I had previously caught **using heroin**. He recognized me too. I immediately stepped out of the line and told my friend, 'I don't want the eggs anymore; I'll wait for you outside.'
I didn't want the young man to feel humiliated by my presence. But seeing me leave, he followed me out and called my name, asking me to wait. He greeted me sheepishly and begged me not to tell anyone about his addiction. I gave him my word. He then asked why I had left the line. I told him I wanted the eggs but changed my mind because I didn't have a formal permit.
'It doesn’t matter,' he said. 'Just go back and stand in line as a formality. I’ll sign off for you so you won't even have to wait in the future.'
'Don't worry,' I reassured him, 'your secret is safe with me.'
'I know you won't tell,' he whispered.
'But I really don't have a permit,' I repeated.
'I'll fix it,' he said. 'I’ll make sure *you* are the one in charge of distributing eggs for your entire neighborhood instead of the local association.'
He insisted I get back in line. I felt I had no choice, so I waited with my friend until our turn came. My friend got his ration, and the young man wrote out a receipt for **ten crates** for me, handing it over with marked respect. I felt sorry for him; I knew his kindness was fueled by pure fear. I took the eggs and distributed them that same day, but I never went back to see him again.
One day, a customer came into the shop and asked, 'Do you have black pepper and turmeric?'
'Yes,' I replied.
'I need a lot,' he said.
'I can get it for you,' I told him, but then curiosity got the better of me. 'Why are you buying so much pepper and turmeric?'

'I’m a **non-commissioned officer** in the army, stationed in Manjil,' he explained. 'I have to commute every day, and my fuel costs are sky-high. Sometimes I buy things here that are scarce over there, and by selling them, I cover my gas money.'
I saw an opportunity. 'Since you’re doing that anyway, why don’t we partner up? Bring me what’s cheap there, and take what’s cheap here. We can make it a **two-way business**.'
I asked him about the price of eggs. 'I live in Astaneh,' he said, 'and I know people who run poultry farms. I can supply them to you.'
It turned out to be a great partnership. It went so well that he eventually sold his car and bought a **pickup truck** just to transport more goods for me. He would arrive at night with a full load, and I would move the stock into the house first, then gradually bring it into the shop.
One of those scarce items was eggs. I kept several crates hidden under the counter out of sight and sold them to regular customers at a price lower than the local **Basij station**. The Basij would sell a mix of cracked and whole eggs for eleven and a half Rials each, forcing people to wait in long lines every other week. But I did things differently: I separated the cracked eggs to sell to the local pastry shop and sold the fresh, whole ones to the people for only eleven Rials. Best of all, I had them in stock whenever they needed them.

The Basij’s Confrontation Over My Fair Prices

One evening, a thin, bearded young man wearing slippers entered the shop. He greeted me and said, 'I’ve come from the other side of town. Someone gave me your address and said you have eggs.'
'Yes,' I replied. 'How many do you need?'

'A **tray** (30 eggs), if possible,' he said.
I leaned down, picked up a fresh tray of perfect eggs, and placed it before him. He couldn't believe his eyes. 'Can I get another one?' he asked.
'Since you've come from so far, I'll give you a second one,' I said.
Stunned, he said, 'Then give me one more.'
'Take these for now,' I told him. 'Use them, and whenever you need more, come back. I'm always here.' My goal was to reassure customers that they could rely on my shop whenever they needed eggs.
'How much?' he asked.
'Eleven Rials each,' I replied.
'Forgive me for asking,' he said, 'but where do you get these? Your price is lower than the **Basij station**, and not a single one is cracked.'
'Don't worry about that,' I said. 'I'm certainly not overcharging you.'
'Don't be upset, I don't mean to pry,' he said, reaching into his pocket. I thought he was reaching for money, but instead, he pulled out a small ID card and placed it on the counter. It read: **'Deputy of the Basij.'**
'Does this mean I'm forbidden from selling eggs starting today?' I asked.
'On the contrary,' he said. 'I want you to collaborate with us so we can learn how to sell eggs as cheaply as you do.' He asked me to visit the **Basij Headquarters** the next day. 'Just show this card, and they'll bring you to my office so we can talk.'
I agreed.
The next day, I went to the headquarters. He was delighted to see me and welcomed me with tea and dates. He then showed me several **bills of lading** (waybills) for trucks that had delivered eggs to the Basij. 'What I don't understand,' he admitted, 'is why our eggs, which we receive directly from the poultry farms, end up costing more than the ones you buy on the open market.'
I looked over one of the shipping documents. 'There are several reasons,' I told him. 'First, this bill of lading only lists the weight in kilograms, but it doesn't specify the **number of crates**.'

'What do you mean?' he asked, confused. 'What does that have to do with the price?'
'It means the driver can weigh the load at the start and record that weight,' I explained. 'But along the way, he can easily transfer several crates to another vehicle and then deliver the remaining load to you. Since you only check the total weight, you don't realize some of the inventory is missing.'
Secondly," I continued, "these bills of lading can easily be forged. I can guarantee you that I could bring the price of eggs down to under one Toman—without forcing people into lines and without giving them cracked eggs. But you must understand that, unfortunately, this trade is controlled by people you don't have the power to fight. If you try to stand in their way, they will simply remove you."
He stood up, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said firmly, "I am not a tree that trembles with such winds. I won't back down."
"I hope so," I replied.
Exactly two days later, he walked into my shop. "You were right," he admitted. "They threatened me. They told me that anyone selling eggs cheaply is a **counter-revolutionary** trying to undermine the Basij. They ordered me to stop selling eggs altogether."
"Do you see now?" I said. "Not only did you fail to stop the theft, but you also closed the only honest window we had."
He left, consumed by shame.
I was no longer allowed to sell eggs either, but my business remained brisk, and I continued to set aside a bit of savings every single day.

Finding My Soulmate for the First Time... But Fate Had Other Plans

During this time, I became acquainted with a very respectable family. Whenever they walked past my shop, the father would stop to exchange warm greetings with me.

They had two daughters: the eldest had just finished high school, and the younger one was only six or seven years old. Every time they passed, the little girl would wave at me, as if she could sense an emotional bond forming between me and her family.
Gradually, this family connection blossomed into a deep affection between me and the eldest daughter. For the first time, I felt I had found the one—a girl from a dignified background. I was certain she felt the same; though no words had been spoken, we both understood this silent language of the heart. Despite there being several shops closer to their home, she would walk all the way to mine with her little sister to make her purchases. However, she would never step inside if there was another customer present. Every time she left, I would walk to the doorway and watch her from a distance, careful not to be noticed. Her little sister would hold her hand, glancing back at me as if to let her sister know I was watching. I made sure never to cross the line of **decency**, as I didn't want to lead her on or disrespect her family's trust.
It seemed her parents had noticed our mutual attraction as well. My relationship with her father grew warmer by the day, evolving into a genuine friendship. I even became close friends with her brother.

An Unbelievable Scene: My Brother Ramin’s Arrival

One day, my brother Turab told me that our eldest brother would be coming from Qazvin the next day for a week-long holiday. He suggested that we 'treat' him to some opium—meaning we should cover the cost. He said, 'A stick of opium costs five thousand Tomans; you pay half, and I’ll pay half.'
'You only want to pay half because you’ll be smoking half of it yourself,' I replied. 'In reality, you want me to fund his habit. I’m not paying for opium.'
He insisted, calling it a 'gift.'

'If I’m going to buy him a gift,' I argued, 'I’ll buy something the whole family can enjoy.'
Eventually, he wore me down, and I agreed. He went out and bought the drug.
Our eldest brother, who was an addict, rarely traveled. He was usually the last to arrive at any gathering because he was so tethered to his brazier that he couldn't bear to leave it. Still, I was looking forward to seeing him after all this time.
The next day, my eldest brother arrived at the shop and gave me a brief greeting. Turab was restless, constantly asking where he had gone and when he would be back. Finally, the eldest arrived, and they headed into the house together. I told Ahmad to watch the shop so I could go inside and catch up with my brother.
When I entered, the opium set was already spread out. My middle brother was busy portioning the opium into small pills. They were meticulous, knowing exactly how many pills made a stick and how many grains went into each pill.
I sat there drinking tea, but it was clear my eldest brother wasn't in the mood for conversation; his entire mind was fixed on the coals getting hot enough to smoke. Since he wasn't talking, I lay down on the bedding that was always spread out in the corner to get some rest.
Once the fire was ready, the middle brother cleaned the pipe, heated the porcelain bowl, pressed a pill of opium onto it, and handed it to our eldest brother.
With intense fervor—like a starving infant clinging to its mother—my eldest brother pressed his lips to the pipe and began to draw. Then it was Turab’s turn. After the middle brother finished his round, he passed the pipe back to the eldest once more.
My eldest brother asked, 'Could you go to the shop and bring two cans of cherry compote?'
I didn't answer. Turab got up and went instead. Thinking I was fast asleep, my eldest brother, Ramin, stood up, hid something inside the hollow curtain rod hanging over the door, and quickly sat back down to continue smoking.
Turab got caught up talking to Ahmad in the shop and took a while to return. When he finally came back with the two cans of cherries, he sat down and began counting the opium

pills. With a smirk, he said to Ramin, 'Your Excellency, you've already smoked four! Enjoy.'
It was only then that I realized what Ramin had hidden in the curtain rod: it was opium. My head began to spin. I got up and walked over to the brazier. I drank some tea and looked at my two brothers, sitting there in perfect harmony, yet acting as if I didn't even exist. I felt like an intruder in their world.
I got up and went into the shop. It was evening. Both of them finished their 'session' and walked into the store. Ramin said his goodbyes and left. Turab, heavily intoxicated and riding a high, sat behind the cash register to check the day's sales—likely seeing how much of my hard-earned money he could pocket.
I seized the opportunity. I wanted to see exactly what Ramin had stashed away. I told Turab, 'I'm going to the restroom,' giving him a chance to raid the register undisturbed while I slipped away.
I went into the room, pulled out the small package he had tucked into the curtain rod, and opened it. Sure enough, he had wrapped three pills of opium in a small piece of plastic —saving them for a rainy day, just in case the main supply ran out.

Building the Beading Press: A First in Iran

"The brothers spent the next two or three days together, caught in their cycle of smoking. After a few days, Ramin finally noticed the half-finished machine I had designed for making **beading (Zahvar)**, sitting in the corner of the yard. He pulled the plastic cover off and asked Turab, 'What is this?'

Turab recounted the story to him: 'I saw Mansour spending all his money on building this contraption, so I put a stop to it.'
Ramin looked at the machine like someone waking from a dream, seeing something extraordinary. He turned to Turab and said, 'What a fascinating idea! I had no idea Mansour was this creative. Why has he abandoned it here?' Turab, finally seeing the potential himself, replied, 'I'll go get Mansour now; he can explain it to you himself.'
Turab came to me and said, 'Ramin has seen the machine and wants you to explain it. Go on, I'll watch the shop until you get back.' I went and explained the design, then returned to the shop. Turab then went back to Ramin, and the two of them talked it over. My eldest brother told the middle one that I was absolutely right—if this machine were completed, it could earn in a single day what the shop makes in a month. 'It's a shame to let it sit in the yard and rot in the rain,' Ramin said. 'I can craft the **molds** for it myself using the **lathe**.'
They both came into the shop together. Ramin said, 'Well done! This is a brilliant idea.' Turab added, 'Ramin says he can manufacture the molds with his machining equipment.'
I replied with total indifference, 'That's nice. Go ahead and build it then.'
'What do you mean, "Go ahead"?' Turab asked. 'We'll build it together.'
I wanted to snap back, 'What have you ever actually *built* that you think we're doing this together now?' Instead, I just said, 'I'm not interested. If you want to finish it, it's yours.' This time, they both began to lecture me, saying it was a waste for me to be trapped in the shop from morning until night. They went on and on about how, if this machine were finished, everything would change.
They kept pushing, but I stood my ground, telling them I wasn't interested in a partnership. Turab argued, 'If we build this machine, we have to turn this very shop into our workshop!'
I countered, 'Why destroy the shop? Whenever you finish the machine, rent a larger space and set up production there. Let this shop remain as a safety net in case the manufacturing venture fails.'

'We started this together,' Turab insisted, 'and we must pool our strengths now.'
'When exactly did we start "together"?' I snapped. 'Where were you when I was struggling to build this machine?'
'I’m here now,' he dismissed my point, 'and it’s vital we do this in the shop. We don’t have the money to rent a factory floor. Besides, this is our father's property; it’s better to build it here.'
'Fine,' I said. 'I’ll sell off the inventory and hand the shop over to you to do as you please.' Ramin chimed in, 'It’s better if we all stick together.' Up until that point, I had never worked with Ramin to see if his actions matched his words, but I was certain Turab was a man of talk, not action.
It felt like I had no choice but to pick between two paths: listen to them, give up on the grocery business, and commit to the machine—or auction everything off, close the shop, and move on with my own life. Deep down, I was more drawn to the idea of manufacturing than retail. I reluctantly agreed.
A few days later, my eldest brother returned to Qazvin to see if he could use the lathe at his office to prototype one of the molds. After a while, he sent word to Turab that it was possible, but he needed to buy supplies. Turab came to me, beaming: 'I have to go to Qazvin to help Ramin build the mold.'
The next day, he took five thousand Tomans from the cash register and left for Qazvin. A week later, he came back and took another five thousand. They claimed these withdrawals were for 'mold fabrication costs,' but in reality, they were buying opium and smoking it together.
Eventually, they produced a single, simple mold. However, since a successful launch required several molds with different patterns, Turab became reckless with the shop’s funds during that period. He even acted as if he was doing me a favor, claiming no other machinist could pull off such work. 'Don't worry about the cost,' he would say.
One day, they sat down to calculate how much capital we would have if we sold all the stock and how much we would still lack. The next day, we started a clearance sale. But

instead of sales skyrocketing, business actually slowed down. Even our regulars bought less.
When I asked them, 'We're selling cheap, why aren't you buying?' they replied, 'We're willing to pay more, just don't close the shop.' I told them, 'We aren't closing; we're just changing the business.'
Somehow, we managed to clear the inventory. I even went to our neighboring competitor's shop. He was thrilled we were closing. I helped him out, redesigning his display and shelving so he could take our remaining stock on consignment and pay us once it sold.
The shop was finally empty of stock. They did the math and said, 'If we want to buy the necessary machinery, we'll come up short on cash.' Naive as I was, I had no idea what their actual bank balances looked like.
During that entire period, Turab had been dipping into my register for expenses without me ever questioning him. I finally asked, 'So, what happened to the income you earned in Arak and the money you collected from the company for the car rental?' Then, trying to ease the tension, I added, 'Don't worry—I've saved about eighty thousand Tomans for a rainy day. We can use that.'
Instead of being grateful, Turab turned on me, visibly upset. 'What is this money?' he demanded. I told him it was my personal savings. He snapped back, 'You saved money without even telling me?' He had become so brazen that he actually considered himself the owner of everything I had!
I wanted to yell, 'You idiot, I'm the one supporting *you*, and you're questioning why I saved a portion of my own earnings?' But the fortune teller's prophecy flashed in my mind, and I bit my tongue.
Ramin, sensing the situation was about to boil over, turned to Turab and said, 'Mansour did a good thing by looking ahead. If he wanted the money only for himself, he wouldn't be mentioning it now. He saved it for both of you.' Turab went silent. I couldn't tell if Ramin had given him a subtle wink to shut him up.
I immediately regretted revealing my savings. However, since my eldest brother had stepped in—albeit without a cent of his own—I didn't want the project to stall.

We crunched the numbers and realized the shop was too small for this venture since we also needed woodworking machinery. A friend mentioned an acquaintance who had a poultry shed on the outskirts of **Sangar** that he was willing to rent out cheaply.

We went to see the site. We asked the owner why he had shut down the poultry business. 'They stopped giving us feed rations,' he explained. We told him our machines required **three-phase electric power**. 'We have three-phase here,' he said. 'Bring your machines and stay for a month for free. If you like it, we'll sign a lease.'

It wasn't a bad offer. We bought several machines and installed them in the shed, completely unaware that this was just the beginning of my troubles with my 'dear' brother Turab.

There was a room in the poultry shed where half of it had been built into a wooden platform, like a large bed. I suggested we bring some furniture and live there for a while to get the business off the ground until we could afford a vehicle for commuting. He agreed.

But he couldn't last. In the middle of the night, he took a hired car back to Rasht just to smoke his opium. This soon became his daily routine: leaving me alone in the poultry shed to push the work forward by myself.

Whenever he did show up, it was already noon. He would head straight to the local teahouse, sitting there and chatting with the villagers—who, out of kindness, treated us with great respect. Then, he'd hire a car and head back to Rasht. In truth, it would have been better if he hadn't come at all, but in the beginning, he showed up every day just to maintain the appearance of being my partner.

Slowly, we prepared for production. The son of one of the villagers, whose house was right across from the workshop, would occasionally come by to help. He had a formidable dog; if anyone so much as looked at its owner the wrong way, the animal would have torn them apart. My brother was terrified of the dog and kept telling the boy, 'Don't bring that dog here.'

The day we finally turned on the production machine, we waited for the molds to heat up and then placed the wood under the press. At first, a beautiful pattern appeared, and

we were overjoyed. But then we noticed a problem: the design was sharp on one side of the wood but faded on the other. The iron molds had warped under the intense heat. We swapped them out for new ones, but they suffered the same fate.
My brother, who until that moment had been busy mentally counting the expected cash from sales, immediately gave up. 'It’s no use,' he said.
'What do you mean?' I asked.
'The machine is broken. we can’t continue,' he replied. I refused to accept it. 'I don’t accept defeat,' I told him.
'Fine,' he snapped. 'Then I’m leaving.'
'You’ve set fire to everything we own,' I shouted, 'and now you just want to walk away?'
Of course, his staying would have been pointless anyway; he was nothing but a burden. His real intention was to take half of the remaining money and abandon me. And that is exactly what he did. There were about forty thousand Tomans left; he took his half and never returned.
I was left alone with piles of wet wood, a broken machine, and a workshop we had only used for one free month. I was grateful for the neighbor’s son, who worked without pay, but I knew I’d have to start paying him if I wanted to continue.
After my brother left, I went to the teahouse and had a few glasses of tea with the locals. Everyone knew he hadn't helped and had left me stranded. The exhaustion of the work was etched onto my face.
Leaving the teahouse, I took a walk through the village for the first time. I exchanged greetings with the kind people there, lost in thought: 'With this money, I won't last more than two months. If it runs out, I have no car to work as a driver, no money to buy stock and reopen a shop, and no one I can lean on. If people realize I’m broke, they won't even return my greetings.'
I thought late into the night and reached a conclusion: even if I closed the workshop now, the remaining money wouldn't be enough to start anything new. I made my decision. Early the next morning, still heavy with sleep, I took one of the tree trunks we used as stools, cut it into various sizes, and

fashioned it into a circular mold. I left the workshop in the care of the neighbor’s son and headed back to Rasht.
First, I went to my uncle’s dental clinic. He had helped me before with molding supplies, but this time I was there to ask for a loan. Borrowing money was the hardest thing for me; if I owed anyone anything, I couldn’t sleep at night. But I was desperate and decided to take the plunge. I knew he was a good man. He asked, 'How are things going?' and I explained my situation. 'How can I help?' he asked. I told him I needed a loan. 'How much?' 'Thirty thousand Tomans should do it.' He wrote the check, and I kissed his face in gratitude.
Next, I went to the foundry I knew. The owner saw me and said, 'You’re back again!' I told him, 'Yes, but this time I need some simple molds.' He took pity on my youth and crafted them exactly as I asked. I then took all three molds to a machine shop to have them turned on a lathe to the precise dimensions I needed.
From there, I went to my father’s house to sleep for the night. I found my brother, Turab, gathered around the opium brazier with his friends. After greeting them, I spoke to his friend—the former bank manager whose wife had divorced him. I told him, 'I need a drill.' He said, 'Go to the local neighborhood association tomorrow, get a letter, and come to me. I’ll give you a good drill at a low price.' I asked how much the difference was compared to the market price. He said, 'It’s a quarter of the cost.' I replied, 'Fine, I’ll go tomorrow. if they give me the permit, great; if not, I’ll buy it at market price.'
The next morning, I went to the association and requested the drill. After some small talk about where I had been, they wrote the voucher for me. I took it to the tool shop owned by my brother’s friend. He glanced at it and said, 'Leave the voucher with me and come back in two weeks to collect the drill.' I protested, 'Yesterday you told me to bring the voucher and get the drill, and now you say two weeks? I need it right now.' He replied, 'Well, then buy it at the market price.' I said, 'Then give me back my voucher; I’ll go to the bazaar and see if I can get it elsewhere.'
Seeing that I was about to take the voucher back, he said, 'Wait!' He went into the warehouse and returned, saying,

'You’re in luck. There’s a drill here that belongs to someone else. I’ll give you his and order another for him.' He brought a drill from the back and handed it to me. I asked the price. 'It’s 750 Tomans, but you can have it for 700.' I paid the 700 Tomans, took the drill, and thanked him.

I went to the bazaar to buy some bits and chisels. As I was putting them into the bag with the drill, the shopkeeper asked, 'How much did you pay for that drill?' I told him, 'I bought it with a voucher.' 'For how much?' '700 Tomans.' He looked at me and said, 'Even with the "discount" they gave you, they overcharged you by 200 Tomans.' I asked, 'Do you sell drills with vouchers too?' He said, 'Yes, how many do you want?' He told me the price: '550 Tomans.'

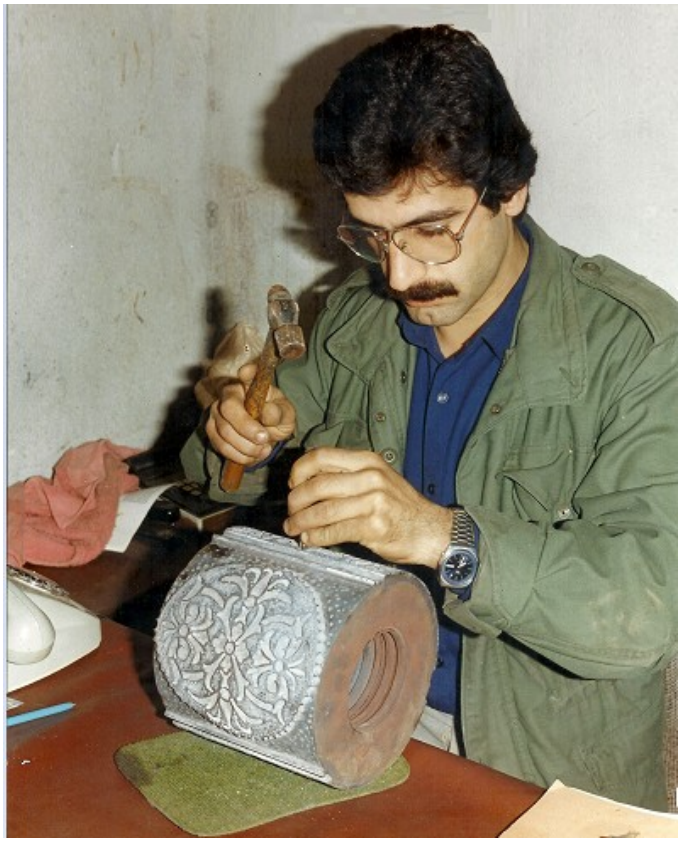
I couldn’t believe that man had swindled me. During the time he was at our house 'detoxing,' I had brought him lunch and dinner every single day and helped him through it. I was deeply hurt.

I left the tools at the house and headed to Saqarisazan to see my friends, Saeed and the others. They asked, 'Where have you been? Why did you disappear?' I told them, 'I’m building this specific machine.' One of them scoffed, 'Stop lying! The ceiling is going to cave in from such a big claim!' They mocked me, but we had tea, and I headed back.

I told Turab about the drill incident. Instead of taking my side, he got angry and said, 'You have no right to ruin my friendships!' I stayed silent. Later, his tool-vendor friend came over to smoke opium. I had a car stereo I’d bought that had a broken belt; I’d managed a temporary fix with a rubber band to see if that was the only issue. The friend asked if it worked. Turab said, 'It’s Mansour’s.' I confirmed it worked with an adapter.

The vendor was impressed. 'This is a great unit! How much did you pay?' I told him 350 Tomans. 'Will you sell it?' he asked. I said, 'Yes, for 400.' He wanted it, knowing the market price was at least 1,500 Tomans. As he was handing over the 400, Turab snapped at me: 'Aren’t you ashamed to take a profit from my friend?' He forced the price back down to 350.

I took the money, thinking, *'An eye for an eye.'* If he hadn't ripped me off on the drill, I might have given it to him for free.



The next day, my brother-in-law brought the stereo back, saying it wasn't working right. Turab pressured me to refund the money. I told him, 'Your friend swindled me. He swore on my life he was giving me a 50-Toman discount on that drill, yet he charged me 200 over the market price. If he admits he cheated me, I'll give the money back.'
Turab's sense of 'honor' flared up—not for me, but for his reputation with his junkies. He paid the guy back himself, apologized on my behalf, and shoved the stereo at me: 'You tried to scam my friend. Here, take your damn stereo.'
Turab only cared because he thought these relationships were 'profitable' for him.
I intended to sleep at my father's house, but I changed my mind. I gave Turab the money for the stereo and caught a

minibus to **Sangar**. Carrying my heavy gear, I reached the workshop to find the neighbor's boy and his dog. The samovar was bubbling; I had a glass of tea and began sketching designs on graph paper. By dawn, I had finished a pattern and glued it onto the cast-iron mold. I used a **center punch** and hammer to transfer the design through the paper onto the iron. Then, I finally slept.

The next day, I started carving the markings into the mold with the steel chisels I had bought. They snapped one after another. I searched everywhere for a tool that could carve cast iron, but nothing worked. Finally, I took a **broken drill bit**, sharpened it on the **grinder**, and began successfully engraving the cast-iron mold with it.

Day and night, I was consumed by the engraving work on the cast-iron mold, losing all track of time. One day, someone knocked on the workshop door. I opened it to find a local villager standing there. I worried the constant hammering had bothered him and he was there to complain, but he smiled and said:

'Don't say such things, Engineer! The sound of your hammer is like music to me. We've grown fond of the sound of hard work. Having you in this village is an honor for us. Our youth have learned from you that labor and effort are nothing to be ashamed of. I saw the workshop lights on from afar and thought the least I could do was bring you some food. Please, it's a humble offering.'

The days flew by, and the locals grew accustomed to the rhythmic strike of my hammer. In the evenings, as they returned from work, they would gather at the teahouse and send someone for me: 'So-and-so has invited you for tea.' These moments allowed me a brief rest. Sometimes at the teahouse, we would discuss various issues; they would seek my opinion, and when I spoke, they welcomed my words with open arms.

Gradually, the local youth began frequenting the teahouse to ask me various questions. I shared my experiences with them candidly. They were moved by my honesty, and their numbers grew day by day.

Until one day, the head of the local **Village Association** sent someone to fetch me, saying: 'Come to the mosque; the Chairman needs to speak with you.'

I went to the mosque. He welcomed me warmly but then spoke with a tone of disappointment: 'In all the time you've been here, why haven't you ever come to the mosque for prayer?'
I replied, 'I don’t have a bath here, and I don't feel my hygiene is suitable for entering a mosque. Besides, does every single villager attend?'
'True,' he said, 'but they don't hinder the youth from coming. Since you arrived, you've caused the young men to stop attending as often.'
'I haven't stopped anyone,' I countered.
He answered, 'Before you came, the youth were at the mosque. Now, because you are at the teahouse, they prefer to be there. We ask you to show yourself among us, so they might return to the fold.'
I said, 'As I mentioned, I cannot come to the mosque, but for your sake, I am willing to stop going to the teahouse altogether.'
The Chairman was delighted. 'Stop going, and let's see what happens.'
The next day, I didn't go. Several people came looking for me: 'Everyone is waiting for you, why aren't you coming?' I told them, 'Since the youth aren't going to the mosque, I won't be going to the teahouse.'
I stayed away for a couple of days, but one by one, the young men started showing up at my workshop instead, wanting to help. I’d tell them I had no work for them, but they’d pick up brooms and start sweeping the workshop anyway; they just wanted to be near me.
During that week, I poured everything into crafting one of the molds. I was finally ready to install it and put the machine to the test. The neighbor’s son came over with his dog to help me mount the mold onto the press.
This time, I took a different approach: instead of an electric heating system, I designed it to run on **gas**, which allowed me to have much finer control over the temperature. I started the machine, and the wheel began its rhythmic rotation. I lit the gas flame and waited, watching closely as the mold slowly reached the necessary heat.
With a heart full of nervous anticipation, I placed the first piece of wood under the press.

The wheel turned, and the pattern was pressed deep into the wood. It was breathtaking—the most beautiful design I had ever seen. All the long hours of solitary labor and the meticulous hand-engraving had finally paid off.

The neighbor’s boy was bursting with joy; it seemed he was even happier than I was. But I wasn't convinced yet. I was terrified that this mold, too, might warp or crack under the intense heat. To be sure, I spent the rest of the day pressing patterns onto dry wood for nearly half an hour. When I saw that the mold remained perfectly intact, a wave of relief washed over me. I turned off the gas to let it cool so I could inspect it closely.

We sat and had tea in high spirits, then returned to the machine. I switched it back on; the wheel was spinning, and I examined it with total focus to ensure there was no hidden damage. To my amazement, I had succeeded. I finally had a proven method to create more molds.

I stood up slowly, the machine still humming and the mold rotating at a low speed. For a moment, I reflected on the hardships I had endured and felt a deep sense of gratitude that my labor was finally bearing fruit. I thought to myself, *'The first thing I’ll do is pay back my uncle.'*

In that split second of reflection, I felt my hand get caught. In a blind reflex, I wrenched it back; had I hesitated for even a moment, my fingers would have been crushed flat by the press, leaving me disabled for life. I looked down at my hand and saw the bone of my index finger protruding through the skin, though strangely, it wasn't bleeding yet. Seeing the injury, the neighbor’s boy panicked and ran out to find a neighbor with a car. We raced toward the clinic in **Sangar**. I remained fully conscious until we arrived, but the moment the nurse pierced my finger with the suturing needle, the sheer intensity of the pain knocked me unconscious.

When I came to, the stitches were in and the wound was dressed. I asked the nurse, 'How many stitches?'

'Seven,' she replied.

A cold shiver ran through my entire body. But more than the physical pain, I was consumed by a single worry: *How will I finish the rest of the molds with my hand like this?* I returned to the workshop and, despite the throbbing wound, I sat down and began sketching new designs with my right hand. Since I couldn't do the heavy carving, I focused entirely on the **blueprints**.

The Komiteh’s Visit: An Unexpected Encounter and a Threat in the Air

People often came looking for me, urging me to join them at the teahouse. Apparently, the local Village Association had assigned someone to spy on me, hoping to find dirt to pressure me into attending the mosque. The number of young men gathering at the teahouse grew daily, and whenever I walked back to the workshop, one or two of them would always tag along.

My finger had become infected, making it impossible to work. I left the workshop in the hands of the young man who worked with me and headed to Rasht for medical treatment. After a few days, I returned, only to find the

workshop shuttered. I went to the worker's house, right across the street, to get the key. His dog barked and ran toward me as soon as it heard my footsteps; it recognized me. The worker invited me in, but I declined, saying it was late.

He brought the key and, seeing how dark it was, accompanied me to unlock the workshop. As soon as the door swung open, his dog rushed in, barking furiously and wrestling with something in the shadows. Surprised, the owner flicked the light switch. We realized a large snake had crawled inside. The dog had mauled it badly and was dragging the snake out of the workshop by its tail.

They refused to let me sleep in the workshop that night. The following night, my worker stayed and slept there with me. He knew this was the doing of the Village Association—they were trying to scare me away. News of the incident spread like wildfire through the village.

A day or two later, there was a knock at the door. I opened it to find **Javadzadeh**, a well-known eulogist and a member of the **Rasht Komiteh** (Revolutionary Committee), standing there with two armed guards. I didn't feel immediate danger; we knew each other, and he was well aware of my support for President Bani-Sadr.

He pulled me into a hug and said, 'I was looking for you in the heavens, but I found you on earth!'

Surprised, I asked, 'What are you doing all the way out here?'

'I heard you were here,' he replied. 'I came to see you.'

Being blunt, I said, 'I don’t think you came all this way just for a greeting. That doesn't fit your character.'

He laughed. 'Aren't you going to invite me inside?'

'Come in,' I said.

He walked in and surveyed the room. 'What is this machine?'

'It’s a beading press I built myself,' I explained.

'Impressive! Well done!' he remarked.

'So,' I asked, 'what do you really want?'

'I need your help,' he admitted.

'How could I help you?' I countered. 'You run with the elite now. Why can't they help you?'

'Let’s take a walk outside,' he suggested. 'I’ll tell you there.'

As we stepped out, we saw a large crowd gathered around the Komiteh vehicle. One of the villagers, seeing the official car and the two gunmen, had assumed they were there to arrest me and had alerted the neighbors that my life was in danger.
The villagers surrounded us with worried glances. One of them asked, 'Engineer, has something happened?'
I smiled and replied, 'No, it's nothing. He is an old friend.'
Javadzadeh remarked, 'You certainly have a lot of supporters!'
The local Komiteh had also been alerted. Their chairman arrived, introduced himself, and said, 'We are very pleased to have you in our area. If you need any assistance, the brothers are at your service.'
Javadzadeh placed his hand on my shoulder and told them, 'This brother is one of the original and sincere revolutionaries.'
They nodded in agreement and invited us to the mosque if we had time. Then they said their goodbyes and left. The people dispersed, but they kept a close watch on us from a distance.
As we walked, I said, 'By coming here, you've lowered the people's trust in me.'
'Why?' he asked.
'Because they think I'm just like you all,' I replied.
He laughed. 'Do we have leprosy or something?'
I countered, 'Don't you know that yourself?! Anyway, what is it you want?'
'I've been nominated for the parliamentary elections,' he said. 'I need your help.'
Surprised, I exclaimed, 'You want to go to Parliament and you need *my* help?! What do I have to do with it?'
'Advertising,' he answered.
'What does advertising have to do with me?' I wondered.
He explained, 'The stencils of Bani-Sadr you put on the walls... some of them haven't been erased yet. Every time I see them, I think it's the man himself! Do that same style of promotion for me.'
I said, 'You want me to promote the enemy of the people? Never!'

He argued, 'I know the representatives have become corrupt. That’s why I’ve nominated myself. I want to defend the Revolution.'
I replied, 'You don’t need to be in Parliament to defend the people. You can do that wherever you are.'
'But Parliament is important,' he insisted. 'My voice will reach many ears.'
I said, 'If you truly stand with the people, they won't let you get into Parliament. And if you do get in, that’s exactly when you'll become corrupt!'
He said, 'I’ll pay you whatever you want. Just a few weeks of advertising.'
I replied, 'You know I’m not in it for the money. For Bani-Sadr, I spent out of my own pocket because I believed in him. But not for you.'
He said, 'You’re making a mistake. Come to Rasht so we can talk more; I’m not comfortable here. Here is my address—I’ll be waiting for you.'
Just to get rid of him, I replied, 'I’ll try.' We went to the teahouse, had a tea, and then they said their goodbyes and left.
When night fell, my worker came to me and said, 'We have a guest from Rasht. My father asked me to invite you for dinner.' I accepted and went over. The guest was his aunt, whose husband was a **Revolutionary Court judge** in Rasht. She spoke very highly of me, saying, 'When the locals go to Rasht, they give us reports of the area. Many were upset by the harassment the **Village Association** has caused you. You are such a hardworking man.' She told me to count on her if I ever needed help. I thanked her.
A few days passed before my worker told me that a member of the Association had pulled him aside. They claimed to have investigated me in Rasht and labeled me a '**Munafeq**' (hypocrite/insurgent). They had warned him, 'You shouldn't work for that man; something bad might happen to you.'
By that night, my finger felt a bit better. I began engraving a new mold. I would work until two or three in the morning. The sound of the hammer didn't bother me; I struck the chisel with a specific rhythm that felt more like playing music. The chisel seemed to dance across the hard cast iron under the hammer's beat, bringing the design to life.

Sometimes I was so lost in this 'dance' that I wouldn't even hear a knock at the door. The villagers would occasionally set aside a portion of their own food and visit me under the pretext of bringing a meal.
One night, I heard a persistent knocking. It was around two a.m. I opened the door to find a villager I had never seen before standing there with a small bundle in his hand. I invited him in. He opened the cloth to reveal some *Kuku* (herb frittata), local bread, cheese, and greens.
I said, 'I disturb you with the sound of my hammer, yet you bring me food?'
'I have something else to discuss with you,' he replied.
I invited him to sit and poured him some tea. He asked, 'Are you alone?'
'Yes,' I said.
In a low voice, he said, '**I have a request. Please do not sleep here alone at night. If you can, do not stay in the workshop at night at all.**'
'Why?' I asked. 'What's happened?'
The man said, 'What I am about to tell you... please, do not tell a soul. It could be dangerous for my son.
I gave him my word that I would remain silent. He continued, 'My son is a member of the local Association. Today, after the evening prayers, a secret meeting was held between the Chairman, my son, and one other member. **They decided to burn down your workshop.**'
I listened, my heart racing. He said, 'My son was deeply troubled by this decision. When he came home, he was restless. He told me to come and warn you, but he begged me not to tell a soul—if the Chairman finds out who leaked the information, it will end badly for him.'
I thanked him and promised to keep his secret.
The next day, I shared the news with my co-worker. He spoke with his father, and a day later, he brought word that his uncle-in-law—the **Revolutionary Court Judge from Rasht**—was coming to see me. 'Come to our house for dinner,' he said.
At sunset, their dog suddenly took off, bolting away from its owner. 'What's going on?' I asked.

'The dog knows my uncle is coming,' my co-worker replied. 'He’s the dog’s original owner. When he was appointed judge, he left the dog in our care.'
A short while later, a minibus appeared in the distance with the dog racing alongside it. When they arrived, the dog threw itself at its master’s feet, circling him in a frenzy of joy.
My co-worker and I joined them. The judge, dressed in civilian clothes without his turban, greeted me warmly. He told me he was aware of everything and was deeply unsettled by the situation. He laid out two options:

1. **Stay and continue your work.** 'If you choose to stay, I will support you,' he said. 'But know that there are many fanatics here. They will find some madman, hang a **"Key to Paradise"** around his neck, and have him burn down your workshop with you inside it.'
2. **Come to Rasht.** 'I will show you the facilities I have available. If you like what you see, pack your gear and shut this place down.'

He handed me his card and said, 'Come see the facilities first, then make your decision.'
He asked me not to hand over the workshop to anyone, just to lock the doors. I agreed. The next day, I went to Rasht with him and my worker—who had now become a close friend. It was decided that we would stay at his aunt's house.
The following day, I went to Haji’s office. The secretary said Haji had a guest. I waited for about an hour. When Haji finally came out, he said, 'Why are you sitting out here? Come on in.'
I went inside. A man was sitting there talking to Haji. Haji said, 'Go on, what were you saying?'
The man pleaded, 'Haj-Agha, help me! The officers raided my son's house and arrested him.'
Tea was served. Haji asked, 'Did they find anything on him?'
'Yes,' the man replied. 'Opium, two bottles of liquor, and a few video tapes...'
Haji laughed. 'He’s a busy boy! Who’s the judge on his case?'

The man gave the judge’s name. Haji picked up the phone, dialed the number, and started the conversation with a mix of curses and jokes. Then he said:
'Listen, so-and-so’s father is here. Do you have his son’s file? What are the charges?'
The judge on the other end said, 'He had opium—that’s one year in prison.'
'So, twenty thousand Tomans,' Haji calculated.
'Liquor—sixty lashes and three months in prison.'
'Change the sixty lashes to two months in prison. That’s another ten thousand Tomans.'
'Pornographic videos...'
'Fine, another ten thousand. That makes it fifty thousand Tomans total.'
Who should the father give the money to? Haji handed the phone to the father. The deal was struck. **Justice had been served!**
By four o'clock, Haji had cleared his schedule. We got into the car and drove toward a private estate he knew. After a thirty-minute drive, we arrived at a massive garden featuring fish farming ponds and several large poultry sheds. As we walked the grounds, he gestured around and said:
'This place spans several thousand square meters... look at all these facilities.'
We reached a building where a brazier was lit out front, and three well-dressed men were seated. Haji introduced me. As the kebab was being prepared, he said:
'I’ll be right back. Go on, take a look around.'
I walked with one of the younger partners to inspect the sheds. He told me, 'See which one suits your needs. Also, give us a list of the equipment you require, and we’ll procure it.'
I replied, 'I have no car to commute here, nor do I have any capital for a partnership.'
'We’ll buy a car,' he countered. 'Don’t worry about the money; we’ll treat your share as a loan. We will deduct 20% from your monthly earnings until the debt is cleared.'
It was a tempting offer, and I accepted. We agreed to sign the contract the following day.

The next day, I returned to Haji’s office and waited for about two hours. Haji finally arrived and handed me the document:
'Read it. If there are no issues, sign it.'
I went through the contract. Everything seemed in order, but one specific clause caught my eye:
'The responsibility for the workers lies solely with you. We hold no liability.
An hour later, Haji returned. I pointed to the clause and said, 'I have a question about this part.'
He replied, 'If something happens to one of your workers, we will provide whatever help we can, but we bear no legal responsibility.'
'But you are a judge,' I countered. 'The law is in your hands. If even you won't accept responsibility, how am I supposed to answer to the law?'
He remained firm: 'Regardless, we do not accept liability. Think it over carefully.'
I asked him for some time to reflect. He agreed, and I said my goodbyes.

The Turning Point: A New Workshop in the Bamdad Caravanserai

"I was walking from the Rasht Bazaar toward my house when I reached the vicinity of the **Bamdad Caravanserai**—a place where I used to buy supplies for my old shop. As I passed the entrance, I waved a quick greeting to **Mr. Bamdad**. He signaled for me to come inside.
'Where have you been?' he asked as we shook hands. 'I haven't seen you in ages. Your brother was here buying from me just yesterday. Why didn't you come yourself?'
I was caught off guard. 'My brother bought from you?'
'Yes,' he replied. 'He came and picked up some goods. When I asked about you, he said you weren't feeling well and that he was handling the shopping. Come, let’s have

some tea; you can tell me where you've been and what you've been up to.'
We went into his office, and he poured the tea. 'So, what's the news?'
'Do you remember that **beading machine** (*zahvar*) I was trying to build?' I asked.
'Yes, I remember.'
'Well, I finished it,' I said. 'A lot has happened since then. I eventually met someone, and we're about to become partners. In fact, I have the contract right here to sign.'
When he asked the name of my partner and I told him it was 'Haji so-and-so,' his expression changed. 'He's a **judge**,' Bamdad remarked. 'He has a lot of influence.'
'He's been very kind to me,' I admitted, 'but I can't bring myself to sign. I don't feel right about the partnership. I've always wanted to work with someone who is more grounded—someone more like myself.'
Bamdad leaned forward. 'I've told you before: I'll do whatever I can to help you. That offer still stands. I am ready to support you even now.'
'But I need a large hall,' I explained.
'There's a large hall right here, directly above us,' he said. 'Let's go take a look. If it suits your needs, bring your equipment and start your work here.'
We went upstairs together. The hall was massive, but the downside was its location on the upper floor; transporting heavy timber and installing machinery there would be an ordeal.
'No matter,' Bamdad said. 'I also have a newly built poultry shed. Let's go take a look at that too. If it works for you, you can take it.'
I agreed, and we drove out to the site. On the way, he explained the situation: 'I'm in a partnership with one of the local villagers you're about to meet, but he can't manage the place. I told him he either needs to buy me out or sell his share to me. When we get there, just inspect the hall, but don't mention anything about your plans.'
We arrived at the poultry farm, which sat next to a traditional rural house. As we stepped out of the car, Bamdad pointed toward the shed and called out for his

partner. Shortly after, the man appeared, dressed in humble village attire, and greeted us with great respect.
'Open up the shed so the engineer can take a look,' Bamdad told him.
While the partner went to fetch the keys, Bamdad asked where the restroom was and said, 'You two go ahead; I'll catch up with you in a moment.'
The partner and I walked toward the shed. Once I was certain Bamdad was out of earshot, I asked the man, 'Why is this place sitting empty?'
'This shed has been ready for nearly two years,' he sighed. 'I fought so hard to get government quotas for chicks and feed. Now, after two years of running back and forth, just as our turn has finally come, Mr. Bamdad says he doesn't want to deal with government rations. He wants to buy everything—and sell everything—on the black market. I don't have the money for that. He's putting me under pressure, telling me to either buy his share or sell him mine, knowing full well I can't afford his. He wants to take my share for a pittance, even though I did all the hard work building this place.'
Hearing this, I looked at him and said:
'Even though this hall is perfect for my business, rest assured—**I will tell him it's not suitable for my work.**
Haji stepped into the poultry shed and asked:
'So, have you seen enough?'
'Yes,' I replied.
'Good, then let's head out.'
We said our goodbyes to his partner and got into the car. As we drove, Haji Bamdad asked for my verdict:
'What do you think?'
'The hall is very good,' I said, 'but the downside is the distance, and I don't have a vehicle.'
'I'll buy a pickup truck for you,' Haji offered immediately.
Seeing that I was running out of excuses, I pushed further:
'The ceiling is also too low; it's not suitable for my machinery. I don't want to put you through unnecessary expenses. I think it's better if I start in the hall above your caravanserai. If the business grows and the income is good, we can expand later.'

He glanced at me suspiciously. 'Did that man say something to you?'
'No,' I lied. 'Why do you ask?'
'Nothing,' he muttered. 'Just wondering. Fine, it’s a deal. That upper hall is yours. Let me know when you’re ready, and I’ll send workers to move your equipment from Sangar.'
'Alright,' I said.
I was relieved. Not only was my new workplace located inside the city near the bazaar, but I had also avoided signing that heavy, one-sided contract.
The next day, I went to the office of the **Revolutionary Judge**. I told him:
'I cannot take sole legal responsibility for the workers.'
I thanked him for his support. He replied:
'If you want to stay in Sangar and continue your work there, I can threaten the local Association members so they won't bother you anymore.'
'I’m not looking for trouble,' I said.
'You’re doing the right thing by not tangling with those fanatics,' he remarked. 'If you ever need my help, you know where to find me.'
I thanked him and said goodbye. It felt like a heavy burden was lifted from my shoulders. With a calm mind, I walked towards our home. From a distance, I saw that the light in the shop was on. When I stepped inside, I found Ahmad there. My brother was nowhere to be seen. Ahmad knew that the shop was mine and that my brother had opened it without my permission. I asked:
– Where is my brother?
He replied:
– He is inside the house.
I asked:
– Is he alone?
He said:
– As long as there is a manqal (coal bed), your brother is never alone.
I stayed with Ahmad and we talked for a while until my brother and his friends came in through the back door of the shop. We greeted each other. My brother understood that I was upset that he had opened the shop without permission, but he also knew that I would not do anything

to him. They closed the shop and we went inside the house.
He asked:
– What is new?
I replied:
– Until today there was no good news, but I hope the good days are starting now.
He asked:
– How are your finances?
I said:
– I am in my worst situation ever.
He said:
– You managed to hold out well with the money you had.
I replied:
– I have borrowed thirty thousand tomans from my uncle, so now I am in debt.
He suggested:
– Come on, let's work together in the shop like before.
I said:
– I am not going backwards. If you give me the money I spent on building the shop, my problems will be solved, and then you can keep the shop yourself.
He said:
– I have no money.
I asked:
– So what did you do with all the money you earned from working in Arak?
He laughed and said:
“I spent it all, and washed it down with a glass of water!”
He was lying. I said:
"Don't you think I had a right to be consulted before you reopened the shop?"
He replied:
“It’s our father’s inheritance.”
“The land is an inheritance,” I countered, “but the shop itself is not.”
“So, do you want me to close it?” he snapped.
I didn't push further, knowing it wouldn't end well. Besides, closing the shop wouldn't gain me anything at that point. I put my trust in God.
The next day, I went to Haji Bamdad. He provided me with a **pickup truck** and three of his workers. We drove to the

village of Sangar, retrieved the **press machine**, and with immense effort, managed to hoist it up to the second floor. The following day, we moved the rest of the equipment. I said my goodbyes to the villagers and gave my new address to a few people so they could find me if needed.
I told Haji Bamdad:
“I need to buy several power tools, including an **electric saw** and a **planer**.”
He handed me the key to his **safe** and said:
“Take as much money as you need.”
“There is no way I will touch your safe,” I replied. “Please, give me the amount yourself and keep a record of how much you are lending me. God willing, I will pay it back once the business is up and running.”
Haji asked:
“How much do you need?”
“Forty thousand Tomans.”
He handed me fifty thousand instead. With that money, I purchased the necessary machinery and installed it in the workshop.

I crafted several new molds of various sizes and began engraving fresh designs onto them. With six diverse patterns ready, I was finally set to begin production. One of Haji’s staff approached me and said:
– 'My son has graduated high school and is unemployed; would you allow him to come and work for you?'
I accepted his proposal. The next day, his son arrived. I explained the current wages I could afford. He was pleased and mentioned that if I needed more help, a few of his unemployed friends could join us. I told him:
– 'Speak with two of them for now; if they accept the same terms, we start this Saturday.'
To source timber, I inquired with several bazaar merchants. They directed me to an **Armenian trader**. I found him and we spoke. He was a good man. When I honestly explained my situation, he said:
– 'I’ll send you two truckloads of wood. Manufacture your goods, sell them, and then pay me so I can send the next load.'
The next day, when I entered the caravanserai, I saw a massive pile of timber unloaded in the corner. Haji came by and asked:
– 'Who brought this wood? Have you paid for it?'
'No,' I replied. 'He told me to produce and sell first, then pay him later.'
Haji was delighted by this display of trust—that someone would entrust two truckloads of wood to me, a young man with little backing, without upfront payment.
I asked Haji’s accountant to tell his son to bring his friends the next day so we could move the timber to the upper floor. When they arrived and started carrying the heavy beams, they quickly complained after just a few trips, saying they couldn't continue. I took off my coat and said to them:
– 'You two lift the wood onto my shoulder; I’ll show you how it’s done.'
It seemed they imagined I was a weakling or a 'rich kid' who couldn't handle manual labor. They lifted a beam onto my shoulder. Haji’s Turkish laborers, known for their immense strength, watched from a distance, skeptical that I could manage. When I told the boys to let go and step back,

they were shocked. I sped up the stairs, dropped the wood, and came back down. They expected me to tire after one trip, but I carried the second, third, and fourth beams myself. By the fifth one, they finally conceded and suggested that, from then on, two of them would carry one beam together.
That day, with the help of the young graduates and Haji's workers, we moved all the timber upstairs. The next day, I began training the new crew on how to operate the machinery. One of them, a man twice my size, didn't even know how to change a regulator on a household gas cylinder. When I asked him:
– 'When the gas runs out at home, who changes the tank?'
He replied:
– 'My wife.'
We began production with this team. I had already researched which patterns were the top sellers among the bazaar merchants so I could prioritize those molds. Gradually, I broke into the market and established a name for myself. With the proceeds from my second major sale, I paid back a portion of my debt to my uncle. Within a few weeks, I had cleared the entire balance, feeling a profound sense of relief at no longer being indebted to my family.
The business soon found its rhythm. Orders increased day by day. I expanded the workforce from three to six men, allowing me to focus more on engraving new molds.
One day, while passing the street where the girl I liked lived, I ran into her father. After our greetings, he asked:
– 'Where have you been? What are you up to these days?'
I replied:
– 'I know you asked Ahmad about me a few times. My story now is that I'm manufacturing wood beading.'
He was delighted and asked for my business address. I gave it to him. He mentioned that one of his friends was a **handicraft designer** and wanted to bring him by the workshop so we could meet. I said:
– 'With pleasure.'
They visited soon after. His friend asked:
– 'What is the depth of the embossed patterns on the wood?'
'About two millimeters,' I said.
Surprised, he asked:

– 'Only two millimeters?'
'I can go deeper if needed,' I explained, 'but for standard beading, this is sufficient. This is only the beginning; I have many more designs in mind.
With an arrogant air and a condescending tone, as if he were speaking to a child, he said:
– 'There is no way you can pull that off. In true handicrafts, the engraving must be at least four to five millimeters deep.'
'I will make it,' I replied simply.
He asked for a pen and paper. I handed them to him. In a matter of seconds, he sketched a design of a **fish and an anchor** and said:
– 'My job is to go to handicraft workshops, draw designs on finished wooden boxes, and then they begin the manual carving.'
He tossed the pen and paper onto the desk, said their goodbyes, and left. I picked up that paper and set it aside. In my heart, I told myself:
– *I will prove to you that I can.*
I went to the bazaar and bought a hand-carved wooden tissue box. I took its measurements, crafted a new mold, and engraved the fish and anchor design onto it. Less than a week later, I ran a test on several pieces of wood and assembled a tissue box from them.
I took the finished product to the father of the girl I liked so he could show it to his friend. When he saw the box, he was overjoyed and said:
– '**With work of this quality, no one will ever be able to compete with you.**

Shortly after, I crafted several more boxes and took them to the **Iran Handicrafts Center** to present them to the officials there. I asked them for a professional valuation. The most fascinating part was that they didn't even realize these pieces were machine-pressed rather than hand-carved.

Three experts consulted with one another and finally announced a price, asking:

– 'Is this valuation acceptable to you?'

'It’s not just good,' I replied, 'it’s excellent! Because I can produce this at half the price you just quoted.'

I was thrilled that even the top experts couldn't distinguish my work from traditional hand-carving. They looked at me in disbelief. 'No, you must be joking! Are you saying these aren't handmade?'

'No,' I said, 'they are not.'

Their tone immediately shifted to disappointment. 'In that case, we cannot purchase from you.'

This rejection sparked an even bolder decision: I began crafting larger molds and launched a serious production line of **machine-made handicrafts**.

The father of the girl I liked, who was retired, decided to collaborate with me. I would manufacture the individual components of the handicraft items, and he and his son would assemble and sell them. This partnership allowed us

to see each other more frequently, and it gave me more opportunities to spend time with the girl I loved. It seemed her entire family was aware of our feelings and wanted to ensure they could rely on me as a future husband for their daughter.
One Wednesday evening, I stopped by their shop. Her father invited me for dinner the following night. I was deeply moved by the trust they placed in me and happily accepted.
The next day, after finishing work, I headed to their place. From a distance, I spotted their younger sister—our **'little spy'**—peering out the window to alert her sister of my arrival. a moment later, the girl herself stole a glance from behind the curtain. I gave a small wave to let her know I had seen her.
"Inside the shop, the father and son were busy assembling the pieces. As darkness fell, they closed up, and we headed to their home. I felt a strange mix of restlessness and shyness, wondering to myself, 'Does he know how his daughter and I feel about each other?'
They spread the **Sofreh** (tablecloth) in the middle of the hall. Dishes of food, fresh herbs, and salad were laid out one by one. The young lady—and she truly was a lady—brought the dishes in with her mother. We exchanged those brief, stolen glances that go unnoticed by everyone else. Her little sister, no more than five or six years old, looked at me with a knowing smile, as if to say, *'I've figured out what's going on between you two.'*
After dinner, the cloth was cleared, and they brought out sweets, tea, and fruit. During the conversation, the mother and daughter retreated to the kitchen, eventually calling the little girl in as well. We men were left alone.
I don't know if it was at the father's signal, but once they were gone, he turned to his son and said:
– 'Please, bring that special whiskey.'
The son returned with the bottle. The father remarked, 'This is a very old whiskey. It's fitting for us to share a drink tonight.'
'I'm not much of a drinker,' I said.
'Neither am I,' he replied, 'but I'd like us to have a glass together tonight.'

I didn't argue. The son brought two glasses of ice. 'Why only two?' the father asked. 'Bring one for yourself; you're a grown man now.'
He brought a third glass. The father asked me to open the bottle. I opened it and handed it to him. He poured half a glass for himself and me, and a bit less for his son. We drank and talked. Then, out of nowhere, he asked:
– '**Don't you have a girlfriend?**'
I froze for a second. 'A girlfriend? No, I don't.'
'You mean,' he pressed, '**there isn't anyone you're interested in?**
I fell silent, lost for words. He seemed to sense my struggle and signaled for his son to leave. The boy, being perceptive, picked up his glass and retreated; I knew he wouldn't be coming back.
The father pressed me again:
– 'Do you truly have no interest in anyone? Or are you just shy? Or perhaps you don't consider me a confidant?'
'How could you say that?!' I stammered.
'Well,' he said, 'if you aren't certain, don't say it. But eventually, you must think about your future.'
'To be honest,' I finally admitted, '**I am interested in someone... but...**'
He cut me off with a playful grin. 'There is no "but." Tell me who she is, and I'll be the one to place her hand in yours.'
My shyness intensified. I knew he was looking for confirmation of his suspicions, but my embarrassment had turned into a flicker of fear. I was terrified that if I spoke the truth, he might say, *'You took advantage of my* trust. Your friendship was just an excuse to eye my daughter.'
As I wrestled with my thoughts, he asked:
– '**Who is she? Do I know her?**'
'Yes,' I replied, 'you know her.'
'Even better!' he exclaimed, delighted. 'Tell me who she is, and I'll go and propose on your behalf tomorrow.'
He was certain his guess was right, yet I still couldn't bring myself to say her name. Thinking I was still paralyzed by modesty, he took my glass, refilled it, and handed it back to me.
– '**Drink this,**' he said. '**It'll help you find your voice.**

But that night, the more I drank, the deeper my shyness grew, and the harder it became to utter the name of the girl I loved. He looked at me and asked:
– 'So, what’s the problem?'
'The problem,' I stammered, 'is that I am friends with her parents.'
'Well,' he replied, 'that’s even better! You want a girl whose family already likes you.'
I fell silent again, taking another sip, searching for the courage to finally say: 'Stop teasing me—it’s your daughter I want.' But my mind was a battlefield of fear. I kept worrying they would label me a traitor—that they’d say my friendship was a hollow excuse to get close to her. I feared being banned from their home, losing the right to even see her face.
He dismissed my worries with a wave of his hand. 'Those ideas are outdated. People start as friends, then they become family. What’s the harm in that?'
I thought to myself, *'It seems there’s no objection from their side.'*
'But,' I countered, 'I only studied until the **ninth grade** (Sikl), while she has her high school diploma. She might even want to continue her education.'
He laughed heartily. 'You’re still on about that? Suppose she’s the daughter of a King! Once you’re married, those things don't matter anymore.'
I realized he had closed every door of escape.
'It might be easy for you to say these things,' I remarked.
'Yes, it is easy!' he shot back.
I took a deep breath and asked the ultimate question:
– '**You mean... if someone with my background came to propose to your daughter, you wouldn’t be upset?**'
'No,' he said firmly. 'Why would I be upset? If my daughter wants him too, who am I to object? I’d even help them get started.'
It felt as if a heavy padlock had been clamped onto my mouth that night; I was struck dumb, unable even to lift my head. I stood up and said:
– 'I've troubled you enough; I must leave.'
'It’s late,' he warned. 'The **Komiteh** patrols are out; you might get intercepted. Stay here.'

But I refused. I was terrified that if I stayed a moment longer, I would blurt out, 'I want your daughter.'
'I have to go,' I insisted.
'Do you want me to walk you?' he asked.
'No, thank you.'
I left and headed to my own home, only to find the usual scene: my brother's friends gathered around the brazier, turning the house into a 24-hour **opium den**. I gave a quick greeting and made an excuse to get out. I was wandering, lost, with nowhere to turn. I had no brother to consult, no home where I could find peace—no father, no mother, no family to lean on.
My poor mother didn't even dare to leave her room because of my brother's friends; she feared triggering his 'sense of honor.' Of course, his 'honor' never flared up for his mother, only for his drug-addicted cronies. He would even scold her for giving his friends a disapproving look.
With nowhere else to go, I rang Ahmad's doorbell. His mother opened the door, happy to see me, and invited me in. I asked for Ahmad, and she led me to his room.
Ahmad was surprised. 'Where have you been?'
'I was at a friend's house,' I told him. 'But when I got back, my brother's friends were still there. Our home has become a non-stop **Shireh-kesh-khaneh** (opium juice den). I couldn't stand it, so I came here.'
'You did the right thing,' he said.
Ahmad's brother, who was in the next room, heard my voice and came to the door to greet me. He asked me to step into his room because he had something for me. I went in, and he opened his wardrobe, pulling out a bottle of men's cologne.
'This is very expensive,' he said, handing it to me, 'but I want you to have it.
I thanked him and promised to keep his secret. I tucked the cologne into my pocket, said my goodbyes, and returned to Ahmad's room.
Even at that late hour, his elderly mother brought me fruit. She had a chest that was like **Aladdin's Lamp**; whatever you wished for, she would pull out of it. For instance, in a season when grapes were nowhere to be found, if you had a sudden craving, she would open that chest and place a

bunch of grapes in the palm of your hand. She set down the fruit and left, returning shortly after with a set of quilts and a mattress for me before retiring to her own room.
Ahmad said, 'Get some sleep; I have to open the shop early because your brother sleeps until noon.'
But sleep eluded me. I didn’t know what to do the next day. Although I hadn't been able to directly tell the father of the girl I loved, 'I love your daughter,' I now felt I couldn't even face him.
Ahmad fell asleep. I lay in bed, staring into my future. The heaviest thought weighing on me was that I had no one to talk to. I was utterly alone. My pain wasn't just the solitude itself; it was the fact that my closest relatives were the cause of it. I couldn't consult them about my life or my path forward.
I don’t know when or how I finally drifted off. I woke up only when the morning sun began to sting my eyes. It was around eight in the morning. I stepped out into the yard, and Ahmad’s mother saw me through the basement window. She stood up, came to the door, and called out: 'Come down, I’m here!'
I went into the basement. The breakfast spread was still laid out: bread, cheese, and walnut kernels. She poured me a large glass of tea and began to open her heart. She raised her hands to the heavens and said:
'O God, I wish instead of all my children, You had given me just one child like Mansour.'
'Mother, how can you say that?' I replied. 'Your children are all educated and employed.'
'My children don't understand how I raised them,' she said. 'When they sit here for breakfast, they sit so stiffly, making sure their clothes don't get ruined. But you, in your **finest suit**, sit so comfortably on my old, tattered carpets as if they were woven with gold. By doing that, you show me the ultimate respect.'
'Mother,' I said, 'if your children's clothes get dirty, you have to wash them yourself; that’s why they’re careful. But if my clothes get dirty, I take them to the dry cleaners. Because since I was a child, there has been no one to wash my clothes for me.'

She said:
– 'Don’t try to make my children look good to me. I know my children... and I know you. And because I know you, I have a favor to ask.'
'With pleasure,' I replied. 'Please, tell me.'
'It’s not for myself,' she explained. 'It’s for one of my friends.'
'No problem,' I said. 'Go on.'
'You know my friend so-and-so well,' she started. 'Their house has no electricity.'
'You mean the power is out?' I asked.
'No,' she said, 'it’s never been wired at all.'
'Who is it?'
'The baker’s house,' she replied.
'Tell them I’ll go this evening to see what I can do,' I promised.
She was overjoyed. Even for a task I hadn't performed yet, she raised her hands to the heavens and commended me to God:
– 'O God, watch over him wherever he goes.'
I knew that family well. Back when I had my own shop, they used to bring their television—which was shaped like a football—to me for repairs. They often bought from me on credit. The father was a baker who made delicious bread. They had three daughters and three sons. I had heard one of their daughters taught the Quran at the mosque. She had come to my shop a few times to pick up the cigarettes I set aside for her mother. I had never actually seen her full face; she always wore a **Chador**, keeping her head down so that only one eye was visible. Out of respect, I never looked at her directly either.
However, she had a younger sister, about four or five years old, who was very close to me. It was interesting—even though I had a mustache and didn't exactly look like a playful person, I always had a wonderful rapport with children.
When evening came, I knocked on their door. A few moments later, it opened, and the daughter—the one whose face I had never seen fully until that moment—was the one who greeted me. She cast her eyes downward and said:
– Hello.

I greeted her in return and said:
– Mother sent me to check the electricity in your home.
She opened the door wider and said:
– Please, come in.
'Ya Allah,' I said as I entered. Her younger sister ran toward me, and I reached out to stroke her head affectionately.
Their mother joined us and told the little one:
– Don't bother the gentleman.
Turning to me with a modest look, she said:
– We are always a burden to you.
'Don't say such a thing,' I replied. 'Please, let's not speak of burdens.'
I went inside and inspected the rooms, making a list of the supplies needed for the wiring. I told the mother:
– We need to gather these materials first. I can't promise exactly when, but I will do my best to get this done as soon as possible.
I left their house and went to the shop to see Ahmad. Not more than an hour or two had passed when I saw the father of the girl I was in love with standing at the door. He greeted me. I stepped forward, paid my respects, and wanted to thank him and his family for the dinner.
He made a gesture with his hand, signaling me to say no more. I saw his family standing a few paces ahead, waiting for him. I waved to them and nodded in greeting. What struck me most was that his daughter was no longer shy about looking at me, even in the presence of her family.
Her father said:
– Come visit us.
Then he said his goodbyes, and they walked away.
I went back inside the shop. I saw my brother had walked in wearing his pajamas, picking out some jam and other supplies to take with him. He asked:
– 'Where were you last night?'
'At a friend's house,' I replied.
With a mischievous glint in his eye, he teased:
– '**You sly dog, looks like you've got something going on!**'
A few days passed after that encounter.

The Story of How I Married Monireh

One early morning, I headed out for breakfast at a restaurant owned by an old schoolmate of mine. His *Sholeh-ghalamkar*—a traditional Persian thick soup—was legendary. My friend was the kind of guy who loved to **talk big**. Every time we met, he'd give me a smug grin and say: "I've got a new girl!"
And I'd always **poke fun at him**, saying: "Man, how desperate must she be to end up with you?"
But that morning, he caught me off guard.
"This one is actually from your neck of the woods," he said.
I looked at him, puzzled. "My neighborhood?"
"Yep!"
"You're **full of it**," I shot back. "You're making this up."
"I'm serious! I even know where she lives. She's supposed to call me today."
Then, he dropped a name that made me **freeze in my tracks**. It was the niece of one of my closest friends. She had dropped hints that she liked me before, but since I was tight with her uncle, she had always kept her distance.
The chef, who always looked after me for a good tip, brought over a steaming bowl of his special soup. I was just digging in when my friend hissed:
"That's her! She just walked past the window!"
I started to get up to check if he was telling the truth, but he grabbed my arm.
"No, no! Stay down! If she spots you, she'll never call."
"Don't worry," I whispered. "I'll make sure I stay **under the radar**.
I took a cautious peek from behind the curtain. There she was... my friend's niece, standing right by the phone booth, waiting. I sat back down and tried to focus on my food, but my mind was racing. *"You just can't read girls these days,"* I thought to myself.
It ate at me that this old "friend" of mine was only looking for a good time. He had no intention of settling down and

zero sense of responsibility; he'd just lead a girl on and then dump her for the next one.
Right then, the restaurant phone rang. My friend picked up and immediately started **sweet-talking**. He signaled to me with his hand, whispering, "It's her!" He beckoned me over so I could hear for myself. I leaned in, my ear pressed against the receiver. I heard her voice—they were making plans to drive to Lahijan the next day. My heart sank. I couldn't help but worry, *"What if this jerk does something to hurt her?"*
Later that evening, I was at the shop talking to Ahmad, but my mind was elsewhere. I was keeping an eye on the street, waiting for her to step out of her grandmother's house so I could talk to her. I had to warn her; I couldn't let her say later that "she didn't know" or that "no one told her."
Ahmad noticed I was distracted. "Are you waiting for someone?" he asked.
"Nah, man," I replied.
Just then, I saw her walk past the shop in her floral *chador*. She glanced toward the shop—a habit of hers. She'd pass by several times a day just to see if I was there. I waited a moment so Ahmad wouldn't get suspicious, then said, "I'll be right back.
I stepped out, initially keeping a slow pace just in case Ahmad glanced out the door and realized I was tailing her. But as soon as I was **out of sight**, I picked up the pace. I knew the way to her house—I'd been in that neighborhood a few times before.
She turned into her alley and realized I was behind her. She started to panic, her steps getting faster and more frantic. I had to speed up too, which only seemed to **spook her** more. By the time she reached her front door, she was fumbling to ring the bell. I didn't get a chance to say a word... so I just turned around and left.
As it turned out, her mother had asked her, "Why are you so out of breath?" and she told her I had been following her. That same night, her mother—clearly thrilled—had rushed over to the grandmother's house to share the "news."
The next day, after finishing my shift at the company, I went to Ahmad's shop as usual. To my surprise, the girl's grandmother walked in.

"Can you step outside for a second? I need a word with you," she said.
I followed her out. "Yes, ma'am?"
She gave me a knowing smile. "I've made your favorite, *Sir Ghalieh* (garlic stew). I'm expecting you for dinner!"
I knew exactly what she was up to—she wanted to **get the scoop** and hear from my own mouth what was going on. I almost made an excuse to get out of it, but I caught myself and said, "Alright, I'll be there."
That evening, I went to *Nane's* (the grandmother). I sat in the basement and started on the stew. I was just pouring myself a glass of tea—the steam still rising from the cup—when suddenly, her granddaughter appeared.
She walked in, murmured a greeting, and turned to *Nane*. "Can I have some tea?"
Nane, who wasn't her biggest fan and always called her a "scatterbrain," poured the tea without saying a word. Then she looked at me and asked, "Did you head over to the baker's house to fix their wiring?"
"Yeah, I did," I replied. "I made a list of the parts they need. I told them to let me know once they've got everything, and I'll head back to finish the job.
She leaned in and asked, "When you knocked on the door, who answered?"
"His daughter," I replied.
"Which one?"
I gave her a description. "I'm not sure of her name, but she introduced herself as so-and-so."
Nane, clearly fishing for more, asked, "**What do you think of her?**"
I saw my chance to **get under her granddaughter's skin**. I turned to Nane and said, "If there's one decent, respectable girl in this entire neighborhood, it's her—the baker's daughter!"
My friend's niece, who didn't think much of that girl at all, looked at me in total shock. "Are you kidding me?!"
"Not at all," I shot back. "I know every girl in this neighborhood like the back of my hand. Name anyone, and I can tell you who they've been with, where they've gone, and what kind of person they really are. I even know which girl

is planning to **sneak off to Lahijan** with some guy tomorrow!"
She froze. She was **dead in her tracks**.
Nane, who never missed an opportunity to stir the pot, piped up: "So, do you want me to go and propose to the baker's daughter for you?"
"Go right ahead!" I laughed, never thinking for a second she'd actually do it.
But the next day, she tracked me down again. "Come over tonight, we need to talk."
"Sure, I'll be there," I said.
That evening, my brother Torab decided to tag along. We sat down at Nane's place, she poured the tea, and then dropped the bombshell:
"**I went and proposed to the baker's daughter!**"
My jaw dropped. "You've got to be kidding me!"
"I swear to God, I'm not," she said. "You told me to go, so I went. Her mother was thrilled! Even her older sister was there—she gave me a huge hug and a kiss!"
I felt a knot in my stomach. What started as a joke had suddenly **become very real.**
Torab chimed in, "Congratulations!"
"Congratulations for what?!" I snapped. "I don't have a steady job, I don't have a house, I don't have a life of my own yet. I'm nowhere near ready for marriage."
I turned to Nane, desperate. "You have to find a way to let them know there's been a misunderstanding."
"I can't," she said flatly. "My hands are tied."
I was at a loss as to what to do. Then, an idea struck me. I thought to myself, "They are very religious... if I ask to talk to their daughter alone, they might object and end the matter themselves."
I told Nane, "Go and tell them I want to talk to their daughter alone."
"Okay," she replied.
The next day, she brought the news that the mother had refused. I was ecstatic! It felt like the matter was finally coming to an end. I was so relieved that I reached into my pocket and gave Nane a small gift to celebrate the conclusion of the ordeal. I decided to go on a trip for a few days to rest and clear my mind.

After a week, I returned. As I was walking home, I saw the baker's wife standing at the corner of our alley. I was surprised. When she saw me, she came forward and said, "If you want to talk to my daughter, she is home now."
I was caught off guard again. "But you had previously refused," I said.
"I didn't want the locals to find out about the matter," she explained. She repeated, "My daughter is home now."
I replied, "You go home, I will come right now.
I dropped my small travel bag at home and took a moment to sit down. I prayed for a way out of this mess. I started plotting: what could I say to make her **run for the hills**? I decided to paint myself as the ultimate "bad boy." I'd tell her I was a womanizer, a heavy drinker, an addict—anything to make her say, "No thanks, get lost!"
With a "trust in God," I headed over to their house. I rang the bell, and her mother opened the door. It felt like a setup; she immediately ushered me to a room across the courtyard.
"Go on in," she said. "My daughter is waiting."
I cleared my throat, whispered a traditional "*Ya Allah*" to announce my presence, and stepped inside. There she was, sitting in the middle of the room in her *chador*, her head bowed so I couldn't see her face. I sat across from her and cut straight to the chase.
"There are some things you need to know about me," I began.
"Please, go ahead," she murmured.
"I don't know if you've heard," I said, leaning in, "**but I'm a total player. I hang out with girls all the time.**"
I paused, waiting for her to look up in horror. Nothing. Total silence.
I doubled down. "**I drink, too.**"
Still nothing.
"**And I'm an opium smoker.**"
She didn't flinch. She probably knew I was **bluffing**; in our neighborhood, people already had those kinds of wild rumors going around about me anyway.
Is there anything you want to say?" I asked.
She finally spoke, her voice calm. "Well... that was your life as a single man."

Then she asked, "Every day?"
"No," I replied, doubling down, "**Six days a week!**"
Silence filled the room for a moment. Then she said, "Well, like I said, you were single... I trust you'll try to cut back on all that."
I felt a wave of shame wash over me. I couldn't help but think, *"She must be wondering why on earth I'm here proposing if I'm such a mess."* She had no idea this all started as a joke that had spiraled out of control. I was **stuck like a deer in headlights**. I realized I couldn't keep up the act.
She still hadn't looked up. "Listen," I said, "everything I just told you was a lie. I don't chase girls, I don't drink, and I've never touched opium. In fact, I can't stand drugs or addicts. If there's anyone with an addiction in your family, please tell me now."
"No," she replied, "we don't have anyone like that here."
I realized there was no escape. I surrendered to my fate, thinking, *Maybe this is just meant to be...*
That Friday, I was at their house finishing up some electrical wiring. After lunch, they suggested I take a nap in the side room. I was exhausted, so I drifted off.
I was half-asleep when a piercing scream shattered the quiet:
"**I'll kill you, you son of a...!**"
I bolted upright. I ran out to find the second son of the family in a violent struggle with his mother by the well. He had her by the throat, trying to shove her in. My blood boiled. Barefoot, I sprinted across the courtyard, tore the mother from his grip, and pinned the son against the wall.
"**This is the last time you ever lay a hand on your mother!**" I roared.
Instead of standing by me, the mother cried out in protest: "Let him go! You're going to kill my son!"
I let him go, but he took advantage of her protection and spat at me:
"Get out of here, you jerk!"
I was at a crossroads; I could either keep fighting or just walk away. I chose the latter. I packed my tools and walked out of their house.

On the way home, I kept thinking, *"They're the ones who told me to leave..."*
When I got to my house, thankfully, no one was home. I sat on the steps, trying to make sense of it all, when the doorbell rang. It was the mother.
"Forgive him," she said, looking regretful. "My son is just foolish..."
"I'm not upset with your son," I replied. "I'm upset with **you** for taking his side after what he did. He only felt brave enough to insult me because he knew you had his back."
She pleaded with me, "Please, I'm begging you to come back..."
"Fine," I said, "You go ahead. I'll be there later."
I felt completely **disheartened**, but for some reason, I just couldn't bring myself to say the words: *"We're not right for each other.*
The next day, her older brother came to see me. "My younger brother actually looks up to you," he said. "He just doesn't know how to show it."
"He should try being a friend, the way you are," I replied.
He later confessed that someone in the family was pulling the strings, trying to **sabotage** the marriage. They had fed the younger brother lies, telling him, "This guy is a womanizer; he's only marrying your sister to take advantage of her."
I brushed it off. "Fine. I'll be over tomorrow."
I talked it over with my sister, Simin, who was a teacher. The moment she heard the family's name, she shut it down. "**They aren't right for you**," she warned. My other sister, Rokhsar, agreed. "You'll be miserable," she said.
The only one in my corner was my brother, Torab. To this day, I'm not sure if he wanted my happiness or my downfall!
That evening, I went to their house and spoke with the girl. "My family is against this," I told her firmly. "**But I'm doing this my way.**"
She beamed with joy. I asked for her shoe size, but she didn't know it. So, I took out a measuring tape and measured her foot myself. The next day, I bought her a bottle of perfume and a pair of **high heels**.

"Start practicing in these," I told her. "Because on our wedding day, this is exactly what you'll be wearing.
She put on the shoes but was terrified to take a single step.
"Practice later," I said, trying to ease her mind.
"Okay," she murmured.
Up until that day, I don't recall her ever having a real conversation with me for even a minute. Her responses were always the same polite, submissive phrases:
"Yes," "Please," "Whatever you say," "You know best..."
I eventually turned to her father and told him, "This house needs work—plastering, painting, and some major repairs."
He gave me a smile. "Fine by me."
"Does that mean you're going to pay for it?" I asked.
"You pay for now," he said smoothly, "**and I'll pay you back bit by bit.**"
I pushed further: "How about I take out a bank loan in my name, and you handle the monthly installments?"
"Deal!" he agreed.
I went to the bank to look into it. They told me, "If you sign the promissory notes yourself, we'll give you the money. But it means **if he doesn't pay, you're on the hook for it.**"
I brought this up to him, and he didn't hesitate. "That's fine."
I went out and bought 30,000 Tomans worth of promissory notes for him to sign. However, I didn't actually take out the loan; I decided to spend my own savings on the house instead. I told him I *had* taken the loan and that he was responsible for the "repayments." I knew his reputation—he was the type who never paid back a dime—and I wanted to see if he'd actually step up.
We brought in a plasterer and got to work. By the time we were finished, the house was transformed. Every relative who visited couldn't stop talking about it.
"Talk about luck!" they'd say. "**You've hit the jackpot with a son-in-law like him!**
My workshop was thriving. The Armenian supplier kept me well-stocked with timber, and I'd settle the bill through the sales of my products to the master of the caravansary—who was also my partner. Whenever I'd take the supplier to see Mr. Bamdad to collect his payment, the Haji would simply

toss the keys to his safe in front of me and say:
"**Go ahead, take what's owed yourself.**"
He'd make a move to leave the office, but I'd always stop him. "Thank you, sir," I'd say, "but please, handle the payment yourself. I won't lay a finger on your safe."
The Armenian supplier was clearly impressed by this. He'd turn to the Haji and say, "You don't even need to pay me. I trust this young man completely. I'll send him as much wood as he needs, and he can pay me whenever he's ready."
It warmed my heart to see such high-level trust. The Haji would tell him, "I don't want anything from Mansour; just seeing how this young man has energized everyone since he got here is enough for me. Whenever I'm free and hear the rhythm of his hammer hitting the molds, I pour two cups of tea, go to his room, and just sit there listening. **To me, it's like music. It gives me energy.**"
Everything was going perfectly... until...

The Strike of My Workers

One day, I took a broken bandsaw blade to the welder to have it repaired and sharpened. After the job was done, I headed back to the company. But as soon as I entered the courtyard of the caravanserai, I noticed something strange: total silence. No sound was coming from the workshop; all the machines were off.
I got worried. I thought to myself, "Has something happened to the workers?"
I rushed up the stairs and into the workshop. To my surprise, I saw all the workers just sitting there. No one was working. I asked the supervisor I had appointed: "What happened? Why are the machines off?"
He replied calmly, "We're on strike."
"Strike? For what?" I asked. "I haven't heard anything about this."
I continued, "Usually, people state their demands first, and if there's no agreement, then they strike. I have no idea what your demands even are."

He said indifferently, "It is what it is."
"What do you mean 'it is what it is'?" I asked. "What is it that you want?"
"Our wages are too low," he said.
I replied, "So, in the short time it took me to go get the saw fixed and come back, your wages suddenly became too low?"
"Yes," he answered.
I realized then that this wasn't a simple matter and that someone had likely instigated them. I asked, "How much of an increase are you looking for?"
"Twenty percent," they said.
I walked forward, passed the supervisor, and asked each worker individually:
"Do you also say your salary is too low and must be increased by twenty percent?"
Two of them answered firmly, "Yes.
The others nodded hesitantly. One of those two men was someone who didn't even know how to change a gas cylinder valve. When I had once asked him who changed the gas tank at his home, he replied, "My wife!" He practically played no role in production.
I went up to the supervisor and said, "I agree to your request. Starting from the first of the month, everyone's wages will increase by twenty percent. Now, get back to work." I returned to my office and got busy.
When the shift ended and the machines were switched off, I saw the workers heading down the stairs next to my office. I asked the son of one of my very first employees—the son of Mr. Bamdad's accountant—to come into my room. I waited for the others to go down, but I noticed a few of them lingering at the bottom, waiting to see what was happening.
I told him, "I didn't expect this from you. If you were unhappy with your pay, you should have told me first. Now, come here and let's settle your account. Even though I said the raise starts next month, I'm giving you your pay right now with that twenty percent increase—just so you can taste the pleasure of your strike!"
I added, "I am neither a landlord's son nor an exploiter. For every hour you worked, I paid your due." He confirmed this and stated the amount owed. I handed over his pay and

said, "And here is the extra twenty percent."
He said, "No, I don't want the twenty percent extra."
I replied, "No, in fact, that twenty percent is the most important part—it’s what you went on strike for!"
I said my goodbyes and wished him luck. He left, looking upset.
The next day, I called one of the numbers I had for unemployed youth and said, "If you're still looking for a job, come to the office tomorrow at ten so we can talk." He was happy and accepted. He came the next day, and we agreed on the wages. We settled that we would renegotiate pay every six months, and until then, he would have no right to request a raise. He signed the contract.
We went back to the workshop floor. I asked the workers to turn off the machines and introduced the new employee. Then, I asked that same worker—the one who couldn't even change a gas valve—to come to my office after work. I had realized he was one of the instigators and had decided that today would be his last day.
The workshop started up again. Less than half an hour later, someone knocked on my door. I said, "Come in." It was that same worker. I asked, "Do you need something?"
He said, "I wanted to know what you wanted to see me about.
I said, "I told you to come after working hours. Do you not even listen to your employer anymore?"
He said shamefully, "I’m sorry. I just couldn't focus on my work."
I asked, "Have you learned how to change a gas valve yet?"
He replied, "The guys help me with that."
I said, "Fine. Since you’re so eager to know: because you work so hard and your work is worth more than your pay, you’d get double the salary if you went somewhere else. I shouldn't stand in the way of your progress; I should let you go."
Surprised, he asked, "Are you joking?!"
"Didn't you all strike for higher pay?" I retorted.
He closed the door and said, "If I lose my job, my wife won't even let me in the house! In fact, all this time, she was surprised that you were even paying me! I lied to her and said you were very happy with me. I messed up; I shouldn't

have asked for a raise at all. I’m willing to give a written commitment to work for this same wage for the rest of my life!"
Then he added, "That damn supervisor brainwashed us while you were away. He said you’re a capitalist—that we have to work while you just sit and eat! He said if we listened to him, he’d get our wages increased in half an hour. We were actually working until right before you arrived, but when he saw you coming, he told us to shut off the machines and sit down."
I said, "Alright. Since that's how it is, I’ll give you a ten percent raise. Go back to your work."
Crying, he said, "I swear I’m not lying, even the old salary was good enough for me!" He then left the room.
I went downstairs to take a walk. The father of the worker I had dismissed called out to me. He was a good man, harmless, a teacher who occasionally came to Mr. Bamdad for accounting matters.
He said, "My son has realized his mistake and is very upset. He is ashamed to face you."
I replied, "I expected something different from your son. I know these kids work for me out of necessity because unemployment is high and times are tough. I know you are a man of integrity, but your income doesn't cover your living expenses, which is why you’re forced to work here."
Then I added, "Tell your son to come back to work tomorrow.
The next day, the accountant’s son returned and resumed his work. But now, I had identified the true mastermind behind the trouble. After working hours, I called him to my office. When he arrived, I told him that I no longer required his services and asked him to settle his accounts.
Surprised, he asked, "Why?"
I said, "You know better than anyone else why. Because you were not trustworthy. Instead of solving problems, you created them for the workshop."
Suddenly, he started shouting revolutionary slogans—those stereotypical "hammer and sickle" clichés. I said firmly, "People like you are used to shutting down work, not producing it. I don't pay anyone for chanting slogans; I pay for work and commitment. You have a problem with

working—not because you support the workers, but because you are afraid of work itself. Please, take your pay —with the twenty percent increase—and go live your life."
I paid him, he went to say goodbye to the other workers, and then he left for good.
A few days later, an unnatural silence once again fell over the workshop. I grew worried that they might be on strike again. I went upstairs. But this time, instead of a protest, I saw that they had taken initiative. They had chosen one of the workers as the new supervisor and asked me to accept him.
I accepted gladly.
The new supervisor said, "All the guys agree to work for a year at the same wage—the one we had before the strike. There's no need for that twenty percent increase."
With a smile, I said, "Starting today, I'm giving everyone a ten percent raise. If the progress is good, I'll increase it further."
I had many plans for them, but first, I had to ensure the workshop's income was sufficient and that I could clear my debts.
The next day, a man came to the workshop and said a familiar merchant from the bazaar—whom I knew—had sent him to buy molding (zevar) from me. I showed him several models. He selected twenty-five thousand tomans worth of molding. Then, he pulled a stack of banknotes from his pocket and said, "I have the money, but I need to go buy a few other things. I'll come back and settle the payment."
I said, "That's fine."
I told the workers to prepare the items he had selected. But when the working hours ended and the workers left, I came downstairs only to see that the moldings were gone.
I asked the workers. They told me that the man had come with a car, loaded the moldings, and driven off.
The next day, I went to see the merchant from the bazaar who had introduced him. I told him the story. He said, "He's not a bad man. He just opened a shop. Maybe he was short on cash. But what he did isn't right; still, he's not the type to cheat people out of their money."
However, weeks passed, and there was no sign of that man...

There were only two months left until the New Year (**Nowruz**), and as usual, the market for repairs and trading was heating up. I had heard from customers that if I wanted to have stock for sale after the holidays, I would need to ramp up production.
Because of this, I placed a larger order with the timber merchant. We pushed production to the limit and scheduled several hours of overtime every day.

The Suicide of the Old Cradle-Maker

One of those days, I went to the workshop early and began working on a new mold. I hadn't eaten breakfast yet. The workers arrived one by one. The son of Haji Bamdad's accountant—who usually stopped by the office—came and asked as usual:
"Do you need anything?"
"If it's no trouble, get a Barbari bread from the bakery by the caravanserai," I said. "I haven't had breakfast."
"Alright," he replied. "I'll light the samovar first, then go."
"No rush," I said.
He lit the samovar and returned. "Don't you want cheese or something?"
"I have cheese, just the bread, please."
I gave him the money and he left, but he was gone a long time. When he returned, I asked, "Was the bakery crowded?"
With a serious look, he said, "No... it's crowded in front of the carpentry shop. It seems the old cradle-maker has taken his own life."
I couldn't believe it. I rushed downstairs, and he followed. It was true; a large crowd had gathered. I moved closer and saw that the old man was gone.
That scene never left my mind. Even if a hundred young people had done such a thing, it wouldn't have been as devastating as that sight. The surrender of a devout man, a man of the mosque who always helped others, was deeply shaking.

I kept thinking to myself:
“Young people might lose hope, but him? Someone who always gave hope to the hopeless?
I remembered a conversation we once had. I was standing in front of Saeed’s father’s carpentry shop—right across from the local Hezbollah booth—when the old cradle-maker came by. He greeted Saeed’s father and then me.
I began complaining about the state of the country. He said: "Don't let it get to you, Seyyed. They will rule for forty years. Just try to stay healthy so you can see the end of it."
I replied, "We are the ones who must take action. We can't just sit idly by until they leave on their own."
He said, "Don't destroy yourself. Forty years—mark my words."
And then he walked away.
But today, that same old man lay defeated in his shop, his knees on the ground and a rope around his neck. A man who hadn't missed a prayer or a fast in his life, who knew that suicide was a sin, yet was pushed so far into a corner that he did it anyway.
I couldn't wrap my head around it.
I asked one of the neighbors. He said:
"His son is a Revolutionary Guard. He’s been extorting money from people. The father felt obligated to pay back the people's losses... and his wife took the son’s side."
The old man couldn't bear the shame... and finally, he gave in.
From that day on, every time I passed his shop, my heart grew heavy. Something inside me had broken.
And it felt as if from that very day, the tide turned. The more we produced, the worse the market became. The New Year was approaching, but there was no sign of the usual hustle and bustle, nor any sales. Everything was stagnant—cold and lifeless.
I turned every bit of wood I had into molding. I clung to the hope that by selling them, I might recover some of my losses...

I went to the bazaar to collect what was owed to me from those who had previously taken my goods, but everyone said the same thing:
"The market has gone stagnant; we haven't had any sales. We can't pay for the merchandise."
I came away empty-handed. The New Year holidays began. I

paid the workers' wages and gave them two weeks off, hoping that after the holidays, the market would bounce back and things would improve.
I was left alone with a warehouse full of unsold stock. During this period of downtime, my mind wouldn't rest. I sat and thought that perhaps I could build a new press machine—something that wouldn't require much space and could even produce in a small room.
I worked on it for nearly two weeks. Most days, I would head to work early in the morning and return at night, exhausted and worn out. But I wasn't hopeless; I had a kind of **stubborn hope** that keeps the light on deep inside a person’s heart.
Finally, I succeeded in building the second press. Simple, compact, and space-saving, yet efficient. When I finished building it, with a particular sense of pride and care, I engraved my name on it.
Looking at it, I had a strange feeling—the feeling of someone who, in the midst of recession and being broke, has created something that might just change his future.

I managed to produce some goods with that new machine, but the market remained stagnant. I had no choice but to tell the father of one of my workers—the accountant for Mr. Bamdad—to let the boys know that if they found work elsewhere, they shouldn't wait for me.
In the middle of these tough times, I had also promised to marry into Monireh’s family and was preparing myself for it. One day, I went to their house to discuss the terms of the marriage. I asked Monireh:
"How much would you like your Mehrieh (dowry) to be?"
Surprised, she asked, "What is Mehrieh?"
I said, "It’s a tradition; it has to be there."
"I don't know," she replied.
"Well, go and ask your family," I suggested.
She went and asked her mother. Her mother said:
"My right is the *Shirbaha* (milk-money), which I won't take from the Seyyed. As for the *Mehrieh*, you two should agree on it yourselves."
Monireh came back. I asked again, "So, what do you think now?"
"Honestly, I don't know," she said.
"When did your sister get married?" I asked.
"Last year," she replied.
"How much was her Mehrieh?"
"Fourteen gold coins and a copy of the Holy Quran."
"Do you agree to that?" I asked.
"Yes," she said.
"Don't you want to consult with anyone?"
"No."
I was happy that she made her decision independently and without any hesitation or formality.
It was Friday when the doorbell rang. I opened it to find Monireh’s mother. She said her eldest brother, who was also a partner in their bakery, had come from Tehran and wanted to see me. He was the same man whose son had married Monireh’s sister.
I went to their house and greeted the uncle. The others left us alone. He was a man with a somber face, wearing a suit that didn’t quite fit him, and spoke with a sweet Azeri accent. He said:
"My son, I’ve heard many good things about you; that’s why

I’ve come to see you."
I thanked him.
"I’ve come to speak with you on behalf of this family," he continued.
"Please, go ahead," I replied.
"It’s about the Mehrieh," he said.
"I’ve already reached an agreement with Monireh," I told him.
"She has elders; she cannot decide on her own," he countered.
I said, "We agreed on the same Mehrieh that your son gave to Monireh’s sister."
Surprised, he asked, "My son? How much *Mehrieh* did he give?"
"Fourteen gold coins," I answered.
"Who told you that?" he said. "My son even gave a piece of land as part of the *Mehrieh*!"
I realized then where this was coming from.
The *Haji* assumed that because I owned a workshop and a shop, I should pay a higher *Mehrieh*. He didn't know that this agreement between Monireh and me was independent and important to me.
I said, "Haji, you’ve arrived a bit late."
"They informed me late," he replied.
I said, "Haji, perhaps you’ve heard this narration (Hadith)...
I began recounting the story of a woman who went to the mosque and asked Imam Ali for a suitor. The Imam turned to the worshippers and asked if anyone was willing to marry. A man stepped forward. The Imam asked him, "What do you have for a *Mehrieh*?"
The man replied, "A sword, a ring, and a floor mat."
With that modest property, the Imam performed the marriage ceremony and said:
"The sword for defense, the mat for living, and the ring as the *Mehrieh*."
Then I added, "This means marriage should be simple and easy, not a display of luxury."
Haji replied, "You can't build a life on just a ring nowadays."
I said, "We aren't trying to live *on* a ring; we want to live *together*."
"It’s not possible with this *Mehrieh*," he insisted.

I told him, "Haji, I cannot put a price on your niece, but these conditions are beyond my means. I only have one request: if you find a groom worthy of this girl, please invite me so I can help decorate their home for the celebration."
I stood up and said my goodbyes. I also greeted and bid farewell to those waiting in the courtyard and walked out of the house. Haji eventually went back to Tehran.
This time, it was Monireh's turn to ring our doorbell. When I opened the door, she said:
"I have no idea why Haji considers himself our guardian! we only stayed silent out of respect for him. Now that he's gone back to Tehran, I still accept the fourteen-coin *Mehrieh*."
I said, "I mentioned the fourteen coins, but I had actually intended to set the *Mehrieh* at one hundred and forty coins on the wedding day. I just want to know: are you sure that no one else is speaking for you?"
She said with confidence, "No, no one makes decisions for me."
I said:
I said, "I want you to decide for your own life. I don't want you to say later, 'Someone said this *Mehrieh* is too low, we should change it.' The agreement must come from your own heart, not from the pressure of others."
She smiled and said, "You're right."
"Alright then," I said. "Go home now; I'll be there in a little while."
After she left, I continued with the house repairs. I was trying to get everything in order to keep my word—to get married and finally settle down.
We closed the workshop for the Nowruz holidays. During this time, I went to work at Torab's shop for free to help out. He took full advantage of the situation, spending most of his time entertaining his friends.
Colorful cars would park in the alley, and their owners would gather around the brazier. Everything could be found in those gatherings—from opium and cigarettes to political analysis and grumbling about the state of the country.
After they left, it was Torab's turn. He would sit with his opium pipe (*Vafoor*), scraping the burnt residue from the bowl, boiling it to extract the sap (*Shireh*). He didn't care at

all that the stench of the burnt opium filled the entire house, making it impossible for me to sleep.
One day he said to me, "Our eldest brother is coming from Qazvin tomorrow."
I was happy and looked forward to his arrival. But as usual, I was granted nothing more than a cold, brief greeting. Then, he sat down next to Torab, who had already carefully laid out the spread for him—the brazier lit, the pipe ready, and the pot of opium sap simmering over the fire. Everything was prepared.

The Brothers' Invitation to Smoke Opium

It was near noon when I sat by my brothers' brazier. I poured myself a cup of tea, and after finishing it, I leaned against the bedding in the corner of the room. My mind was weighed down by my troubles and complications.
In the midst of this, my eldest brother turned to Torab and said:
"Why is Mansour so upset? Could he be in love?"
Torab laughed and replied, "I'll fix him up right now."
Then, he looked at Ramin and said, "Remember when I used to smoke? One day you found out and told me: 'Don't smoke in front of just anyone; come to our own house.' Now, I’m telling you: if you smoke, don't be ashamed. Smoke right here with us."
My eldest brother happily agreed:
"Yeah, if you're going to do it, come and do it right here."
The middle brother, who was always looking for an opportunity to break my spirit, eagerly picked up the opium pipe (*Vafoor*) and said:
"Let me prepare it for you!"
I moved closer to the brazier. Torab was anxious to hold the pipe for me, but I said:
"No, I know how it's done. I'll hold it myself."
I took the pipe and placed it to my lips. They handed me the

tongs with a glowing coal. I held the fire over the opium. Torab, looking at the eldest brother with delight, said:
"See? I told you he’s a man of pleasure!"
Then he said to me:
"Inhale, before it dries up!
But I just looked at them without taking even a single puff. I was waiting, perhaps, for someone to stop me. But no one said a word. They were just waiting to watch my downfall. I handed back the pipe and stood up. I went to the mirror and said to myself: "Well done to you! Look at who is trying to crush you." I felt suffocated; not from the smell of opium, but from the stench of betrayal and loneliness. I stormed out of the house. As I was walking, I neared a draper's (fabric) shop. The old draper, a humorous man, greeted me and joked:
"One shouldn't act grand in a borrowed suit!"
I smiled, thinking he was kidding. But he immediately added:
"Aren't you ashamed? Your brother works from morning till night to buy you clothes, and you just wander the streets acting entitled?"
I asked, "Are you joking?"
He said sternly, "No, I'm very serious. Aren't you really ashamed?"
I wanted to say that the shop belonged to me and that Torab had seized it, but I remained silent. I only said:
"To this day, on this earth, no one has helped me with even a single Rial. If anyone gave me a Rial, they took twice as much back. Please tell the person who said this to come and say it to my face if they have the guts."
He asked, "You mean Torab doesn't pay your expenses?"
I repeated: "Tell him to come and say it to my face."
That night, out of distress, I went to Ahmad’s house. After that, I spent most of my nights sleeping there. Until one day, Torab asked:
"Why do you go to Ahmad’s? People will start talking."
I replied, "Our home has turned into an opium den. If people want to gossip about me sleeping at Ahmad's, let them."
Then I told him: "Settle the matter of the shop. Pay me what you owe so I can rent a house."

"What do you mean?" he asked.
"I built that shop with my own money," I said. "You're using it without my permission."
He asked, "How much do you want to sell it for?"
I said, "We'll ask the local real estate agent to find a buyer."
He agreed, "Fine.
The next day, I went to the real estate agent and asked him to find a buyer. Then, I headed out to continue the repairs on Monireh's house. My work lasted until nightfall. I wanted to go to Ahmad's house to sleep, but Monireh's mother said:
"It's late now, just stay here."
"No, I want to go to our own place," I replied.
She said, "I know you've been staying at Ahmad's for a while now."
She insisted I stay the night. I wish I hadn't...
Reluctantly, I agreed. They laid out bedding for me in a room on the other side of the courtyard. I didn't feel well; my mind was racing with a thousand thoughts as I fell asleep.
I woke up around 4 or 5 in the morning and headed toward the restroom. As I approached the bathroom area, I heard a sound. It wasn't the sound of running water... I grew curious. I opened the bathroom door... and saw something I never could have imagined.
Monireh's father and mother were kneeling on the bathroom floor. The father was holding the opium pipe (*Vafoor*) for his wife, and she was smoking.
When she saw me, she tried to quickly hand the pipe to her husband. For a few seconds, we just stared at each other. Then, without even using the restroom, I turned back, put on my clothes, and walked out of the house.
Dazed and in shock, I made my way back home. I sat on the stairs for half an hour, then started walking toward my friend's Aash (soup) shop for breakfast. One of the local "Komeiteh" members spotted me and began tailing me. I was in a terrible state of mind, but he wouldn't let up.
I turned into a dead-end alley, and he followed. When I reached the end, I turned around and said:
"It's a dead end. I think you've taken a wrong turn; you should head back."

Realizing he had been caught, he went silent and turned around.
I went to the Aash shop, but I couldn't swallow a single spoonful. With a heavy heart, I walked toward the real estate agency, hoping the owner had arrived. He wasn't there; only his assistant was. I told him to ask the owner to stop by our shop whenever he got in.
I went to the shop. Ahmad had already opened it. He said: "I waited for you until late last night; why didn't you show up? Where did you sleep?"
"At a friend's house," I replied.
He grinned and teased, "You rascal, which friend?"
I answered coldly, "I'm really not in the mood for jokes."
"Did you have a fight with your brother?" he asked.
At that moment, my brother's voice drifted in. He walked into the shop in his pajamas and said:
"Weren't you at Monireh's house last night?"
I had no choice but to admit it: "I was."
Just then, the real estate agent arrived. He asked:
"You sent word that you needed me?"
I said, "I wanted to see how much our shop is worth."
He replied, "Since it doesn't have a formal deed, it's worth three hundred thousand Tomans."
I thanked him, and he left.
I headed toward the bazaar to see the merchant who had guaranteed the deal. I asked him for the address of the man who had taken the moldings without paying.
Once I had the address, I traveled to a village on the outskirts of Rasht. A few people were standing in front of his shop. He was holding a knife, busy dividing rationed cheese. As soon as he saw me, he snapped:
"What do you want?"
I said, "You took goods from me and said you'd bring the money, but you never did."
He replied dismissively, "The moldings you gave me are all in the other shop; go take whatever is left."
I went there and saw only a few warped and crooked pieces; the rest had been sold. I came back and said:
"You've sold ninety percent of them. Just pay me for those."
He pushed the customers aside, gripped the knife tightly, and took a step toward me:

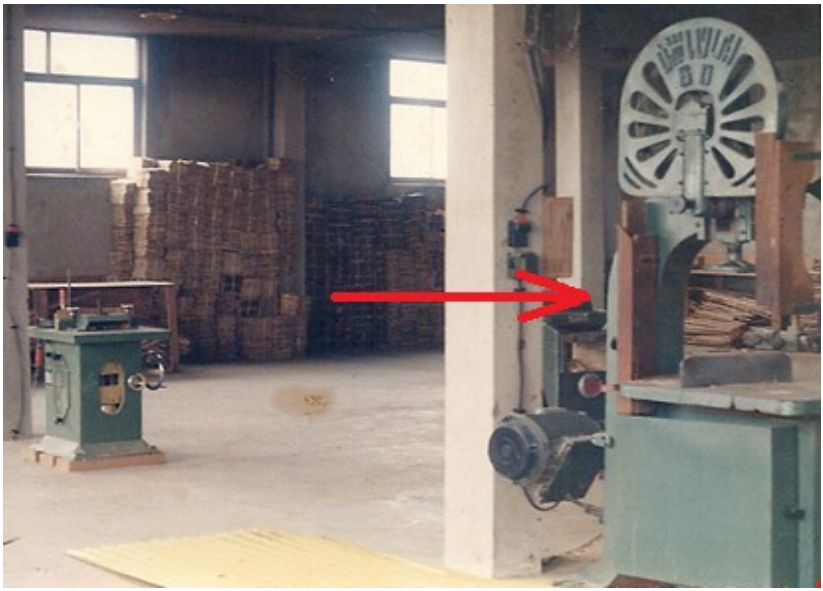
"I won't pay! What are you going to do about it?"
I said, "I didn't come here for a fight. If you won't pay, you won't pay. Even the merchant who guaranteed for you said maybe you just hadn't found the time. Since you're refusing, I'll be on my way."
He yelled back violently, "Go, and don't you dare look back!"
I had walked a few steps away when a woman's voice called from the upper floor:
"Come get your lunch!"
I looked up; it was his wife calling him from the window. As I was leaving, one of his customers called out to me:
"Sir! Sir!"
I turned around. He said, "You did the right thing not fighting him. This man was decent until he joined the local village council. Since then, he's opened this shop and built a two-story house. He has the money; he's lying to you."
I said, "That is between him and his God."
I said my goodbyes and returned to Rasht. I waited until everyone had left our shop. Ahmad closed up and handed me the keys.
He asked, "Aren't you coming to our house?"
"I want to talk to my brother," I replied.
Worriedly, he said, "I hope to God it goes well!
I went home. My brother was high, preparing his opium gear with smiles and jokes. I handed him the keys and said:
"Ahmad isn't coming tomorrow."
He said, "Keep them; you open the shop yourself."
I told him, "The real estate agent valued the shop at three hundred thousand Tomans. Since you're my brother and haven't invested a dime, give me a hundred and fifty thousand, and the shop is yours."
He replied mockingly, "That's too expensive. I don't have it."
I said, "You know you have no right to this shop. Even though you did nothing to help build it, I'm willing to give *you* a hundred thousand Tomans, on the condition that you stop interfering."
"That's too cheap," he said.
I countered, "Fine, then *you* give me a hundred thousand,

and I’ll walk away."
With a sneer, he laughed, "I don't have it!"
He knew I was broke; he knew I was trapped. Finally, he said:
"It’s fine just the way it is."
"What do you mean, 'fine the way it is'?" I asked.
He said, "If you like, we can work as partners!"
I had reached my limit. "That is impossible."
"It is what it is!" he snapped back.
I realized then that staying in that house was no longer possible. It wasn't the smell of opium that was suffocating me—it was the stench of the person I once called my brother.
I stormed out of the house. It was the night of *Sham-e Ghariban* (the night of the displaced), but I had become a displaced soul myself. In the quiet, deserted alleys, I walked aimlessly, like someone who had lost everything. I felt as if all the sorrows of the world had collapsed upon me.
A heavy lump was tightening in my throat.
I thought to myself:
The workshop is idle, the workers are unemployed, the debtors are heartless, my shop has been seized, my father’s house has turned into an opium den, my mother is displaced, and now I must return in shame to become an apprentice to the very person who brought me down.
I had decided to build a peaceful life through marriage—a healthy home filled with love. But Monireh’s parents turned that dream into a mirage...

The Decision by the Bandsaw

My eyes fell upon the shop of the old cradle-maker... the one who had hanged himself in his own workshop. The scene of his strangulation, his knees on the floor, that knotted rope—it all came back to life before my eyes. An image that would never, ever fade from my mind.

As I was drowned in those bitter thoughts, I heard a voice with an Azeri accent. Someone called from behind:
"Agha Mansour!"
I turned around. It was one of Haji Bamdad’s workers, standing at the entrance of the caravanserai. When he saw me, he smiled and walked toward me with joy. But sensing my distress from my face, he said with concern:
"There’s hot tea on the samovar. Come, let me pour you a glass; it’ll make you feel better."
I was exhausted; I didn't even have the strength to stand, let alone walk. But listlessly, I followed him into the caravanserai.
He asked, "Sir, when will you return to work? The boys are waiting for the shop to start up again."
"Soon, God willing..." I replied.
Then I added, "I’m going upstairs; I’ll be right back."
"Alright, I'll be right here," he said.
I climbed the stairs. I passed my office and entered the workshop hall.
Silence. Only the sound of my footsteps echoed on the floor. I looked around at the machines, the tools, and the stocked goods. Nothing moved. It was as if the whole world had come to a standstill.
I walked until I reached the large bandsaw.
I don't know why, but I couldn't pull myself away from it. It was as if it had become a magnet. It was as if it were calling my name. A soft, tempting, whispering voice. A voice saying: "Come... I will set you free..."
I flipped the switch.
The saw began to spin. Slowly at first, then faster. Its sound echoed in my head like a deathly lullaby.
I took a few steps back and stood directly in front of it.
My eyes were fixed on the blade, spinning with terrifying speed.
I took a deep breath...



The screeching sound of the saw gradually turned into a
:song that seemed to call out to me
"...Come... come"
It was as if it wanted me to surrender my fate to its blades.
And I, drowning in a swamp of troubles, was giving in to its
.whispers
It felt like the saw understood my state; it knew how deep
into the darkness I had sunk. It was calling me, wanting to
.take me into its embrace
Its hold grew stronger by the moment, drawing me toward
.it slowly and gracefully, like a restless lover
In that very moment, I suddenly felt someone beside me;
.someone who had been lost for a long time
.God
.The same God I thought had abandoned me long ago
I began to talk to Him; not a prayer, not a whisper, but a
complaint—a bitter, burning grievance full of choked-up
:tears
O Great and Merciful God, You whose greatness is infinite, "
?is there no place for me in this world
My father used to say that no leaf falls from a tree except

.by Your will
?Am I not worth as much as a single leaf
?Or is it Your decree that I should fall
Why is it that every time I try to build a decent life, You
?Yourself throw stones in my path
Criminals roam free, unpunished, while I must be crushed
?under the weight of all this suffering
'.You said, 'The plan is ours, the destiny is Yours
"!But no matter how much I plan, Your destiny ruins it all
The sound of the saw kept spinning. Calm, tempting, it
.called to me
I was born into a family where blows took the place of "
.caresses
.You took my father away
My mother—the one who said she saved me from the
clutches of jackals—tried to kill me by putting nails in my
.food
My dearest ones, who should have had my back, tried to
.make me an addict
...O Merciful God, O Creator of existence
Why is it that me, and only me, You bring to my knees every
"?single time
The saw watched me ruthlessly, like a wolf watching its
.defenseless prey

:And suddenly, a voice within me said
...You are the problem"
.You are too much for this world
Do you think anyone will cry if you're gone? No! Many
"...would even be happy
It was close. So close. I only had to close my eyes, step
.forward, and it would all be over
...But
.It was as if an invisible hand gripped my shoulder
.I stopped
:A thought echoed in my mind
?What is the innkeeper’s fault"
"?What will people say? That he caused my death
I took a breath. I spoke again; but this time, not with a
:grievance, but like a wounded warrior
I don’t know why You have ordained all this hardship for "

:me, but know one thing
,From this moment on
.No matter what disaster befalls me, I will not let go of You
!If You want to break me, then break me
".But I will not surrender
Tears flowed uncontrollably. I cried so much that the front
.of my shirt was soaked
.With a trembling hand, I switched off the saw
As the whirring of the blade faded into silence, I stepped
.forward and kissed its lifeless metal
.Goodbye, saw
.You did not win
Light-hearted, as if I had just been born anew, I walked out
.of the workshop

When I came down, Haji Bamdad's worker was still waiting
:for me. With concern in his voice, he asked
What happened, sir? Why are your eyes so red? Why is "
"?your shirt soaked
:I gave a cold smile and said
"...Sawdust got in my eyes"
:He asked
"?Shall I pour you some tea"
:I said
".No, I have to go home and put some drops in my eyes"
I said my goodbyes and, with a new perspective on life, I
.headed home

Emigrating from Iran to Nowhere

I had made my decision:
I had to flee this hell.
I walked to my shop and remembered that I had the key with me.
I told myself it was better to open the shop and wait for Ahmad there instead of going home.
I pulled the key from my pocket, and as I leaned down to unlock the door, a small piece of paper caught my eye—

hardly an inch or two in size, tucked right under the lock. I picked it up; it was folded several times. I opened it. In the center, it simply read:

"You made the right decision. Do not let doubt creep in. Act on the choice you have made."

I froze. I thought to myself:

Who could have left such a message this early in the morning?

How did they know I had decided to emigrate?

And most importantly, how did they know I would come here right now and pick up this note?!

No one knew of my decision. But whatever it was, this writing felt like a heavenly message, a source of strength for my heart. I stood taller.

I opened the shop door and sat down, waiting for my brother, Torab, to wake up.

It was near noon when I told him:

"After you finish your breakfast, I need to talk to you."

Half an hour later, he called out:

"I've eaten. Come in."

I locked the shop door and went inside the house. It was time for the final ultimatum.

He asked:

"Where were you last night? I was very upset after you left."

I said:

"Don't worry yourself. What was meant to happen, happened."

He asked:

"What happened?"

I said:

"I’ve made my decision."

"What decision?" he pressed.

I replied:

"You have exactly one week to pay me for the shop. Otherwise, I’ll lock it up and won’t let you open it again."

Then, I went to the book market and bought an atlas. I sat down and studied the countries of the world so I could decide on my future with my eyes wide open.

Among all the countries, I learned that **Sweden** has the best democracy in the world. I read that their courts only open twice a year—and that’s just to dust the place off!

My mind was made up.
I went to my debtors. Whoever didn't pay their debt, I took back the goods and stored them in the house's warehouse.
My sister, Rokhsareh, said:
"Torab says you're planning to close the shop.
I said:
"Yes. I’m going to close the shop I built with my own hands."
Rokhsareh said with distress:
"Do you realize that if you close the shop, he will become a burden on my life? He’ll tear my world apart."
I replied:
"Then tell him to pay me the money I spent building that shop, and I won’t close it."
"How much did you spend?" she asked.
"Forty thousand Tomans," I said.
She sighed, "Torab says he doesn't have it."
"He’s lying," I countered. "Tell him to gather as much as he can. And don’t let him think that if I close the shop and leave, he can just reopen it. No—I’ll demolish the shop and turn it back into a courtyard."
The next day, Torab said:
"I can’t manage more than twenty thousand Tomans."
I knew he was lying, but my heart ached for my sister. I accepted.
I had some household items—a television and two small rugs—that I wanted to sell. I took another four thousand Tomans from Torab for those.
He asked me to sign a document so that while I was gone, he could use it only to get a business license and receive rations for milk, yogurt, and other goods. I agreed.
Together, we went to the notary office of Ayatollah Lahouti’s brother—the activist who was killed in Khomeini's prison under the watch of Lajevardi.
I signed the document.
I also had several promissory notes (safteh) from Monireh’s father, totaling 28,000 Tomans. I handed them all over to Torab, strictly instructing him never to ask them for the money. But I told him that if they chose to pay on their own, he should send the money to me.
In the house's warehouse, there was also over 60,000

Tomans worth of finished moldings (zehvar), which Torab promised to sell and send the proceeds to me.
That night, Monireh’s mother came over. She had realized that I no longer intended to marry her daughter. With a look of embarrassment, she asked:
"What do you plan to do now?"
I replied:
"My mind isn't working right now. I just want to travel for a while. I’ll talk to you when I return."
I stayed awake late into the night... and I didn't even realize when I finally drifted off to sleep.

Emigrating from Iran to Nowhere

After some time, my father came to me in a dream and took me with him...
I dreamed he was standing at the corner of the alley in his old Volkswagen Beetle, waiting for me. As always, he looked sharp and neat. We cruised through the city streets together. He had taken me for drives in that car many times before, but this time was different; he was taking me to places that felt foreign. It felt as if we were no longer in Iran.
He pulled over under a pedestrian bridge. I got out and climbed the stairs. From up there, I saw a police car parked a little further away. Two officers were standing by it, talking, but neither their uniforms nor their car looked like the Iranian police. I turned back and looked at my father standing by his car. He gave me a look of satisfaction, smiled, and waved. I headed back down the stairs, but he was gone. It was as if he had said his final goodbye.
In the dream, I didn't feel like he was dead; it was as if he had just moved away and was living somewhere else. I asked him several times, "Where do you live?" but his only answer was that same calm, patient smile. As he departed, I woke up. I was puzzled—why didn't he drive me back home this time? Even though I had barely slept, I felt energetic and light-hearted. My heart was warmed by the fact that, even in a dream, I had spent a few minutes by his side.

The promised day arrived. It was time to act on my decision. I took a briefcase and packed only a few clothes and essentials: two pairs of trousers, two shirts, some underwear, shaving gear...
I went to my eldest sister Simin's house to say goodbye, then to Rokhsareh's. We took a few souvenir photos. Then I headed to Sagharisazan to say goodbye to Saeed and his father. No one truly believed I could actually manage to leave the country.
I took a bus to Tehran to my sister Nasrin's house. As luck would have it, my sister Esmat, who lived in Ahvaz, had also come to Tehran for the holidays with her family. After greeting them, I told them I intended to travel. We took some photos together, and that night, I went out for a walk and a talk with my brother-in-law—a very wise and understanding man.
The next day, I bought a bus ticket to Turkey.
I converted all my money into dollars: a total of $1,800. With this amount, I had to make it all the way to Sweden.
The day of departure arrived. The bus was a mix of political activists, tourists, and migrants. Two young men sat in front of me, speaking Armenian.
After a long journey, we reached the Turkish border. The bus assistant asked everyone to have their passports ready. I held my passport in my hand, flipping through its pages. I remembered a fortuneteller who, years ago during the final years of the Shah's reign, had told me:
"You will receive a booklet and go on a very long journey."
I told myself he probably meant this very passport and this very trip. I didn't know when I would return, or if I would return at all.
The bus assistant took my passport and left. A few officers came with him and ordered some passengers to get off. They returned the passports of the rest of us, and the bus started moving. We were only a few meters away from Turkish soil. I held my breath. With every meter we moved further from Iranian soil, my heart beat faster—not just from the excitement of the journey, but from the ache of tearing myself away from my homeland.
As soon as the bus entered Turkey, it pulled over by a restaurant. Upon getting off, some passengers began to

dance and celebrate. Bottles of alcohol were opened one after another. From the other side of the border, a few Revolutionary Guards began shouting insults and threats: "Don't think just because you crossed the border, you can do whatever the hell you want!"
The driver pleaded with everyone to get back on. The bus moved on. On the way to Istanbul, the Turkish police stopped the bus several times. Each time, the driver satisfied them with a pack or two of cigarettes. It reminded me of the Shah's era, when local policemen would take bribes from shopkeepers.
On this journey, I became friends with those two Armenian youths. We talked about our destinations. One of them said: "I've been to Turkey before; I know how to get by. Don't go to hotels, or you'll run out of money. We should rent a room, the four of us together, and split the expenses."
I agreed. We went looking for a room. We befriended another Iranian man as well, and the four of us rented a room together. We cooked and ate a simple dinner. We talked about our goals: the two Armenians intended to go to Germany. The third just wanted to be away from Iran, anywhere at all. And I... I wanted to go to **Sweden**.
The next day, we went to a street lined with travel agencies. There were people there who would refer travelers to these agencies for a commission. We got caught up with one of them. He took us to an agency owned by a man named Seifi, who claimed he used to be Mr. Banisadr's helicopter pilot. He was waiting to go to Australia legally through the **UN**. He had a partner named Lotfi.
They were very warm with us. They said:
"Since you're good guys, we'll give you a discount."
The arrangement was to pay half the money upfront and the other half after receiving the visa. They took $1,800 from those headed to Germany. To me, wanting to go to Sweden, he said:
"$2,400."
I told him I didn't have it. He discounted it to $2,200. I had no choice but to accept.
The next day, I went to pay the first half. Seifi wasn't there. His partner, Lotfi, said:
"It's fine, give it to me."

I gave him $1,000. Lotfi said half the payment should be $1,200. I told him I'd bring the rest tomorrow. He gave me a receipt and accepted. He promised to get everything sorted and send us to our destinations within a week. Now, my passport was in his hands. My money was dwindling. I only had $800 left, and I still had to come up with another $400 for the second half...

From that day on, we went to the agency every single day to follow up. Each time, we encountered people whose money had been taken by smugglers who then vanished. One of the most heartbreaking scenes was a mother who had come to Turkey with her two young daughters. She had been deceived by a smuggler's promise that "everything would be sorted in a few days." But now, weeks had passed; she had no money left, had to leave her hotel, and was forced to live in a cramped room with several others. She was constantly anxious about her daughters, fearing they might come to harm.

Every day brought bad and discouraging news. People said border controls were tightening and getting a visa had become nearly impossible. One day, I went to the telephone office and called my eldest sister, Simin. I asked her to tell my brother, Torab, to send me money. She said, "Torab is right here, talk to him yourself." When he took the phone, because he was at our sister's house, he started comforting me:

"Don't worry, I'll send the money soon."

But two weeks passed, and there was no sign of it. Meanwhile, the smuggler kept making the same old promise:

"Everything will be ready by next week."

Despair grew every day. My roommates didn't seem to care; it didn't matter to them because they were traveling on their fathers' dime, and if things didn't work out, they could easily return to Iran. I, however, had to sustain myself. I was forced to buy telephone tokens (jetons) from the office in the morning and sell them at a higher price at night when the office was closed, just to cover my daily expenses. Two weeks went by, and there was still no word from the smuggler.

One day, at my roommates' insistence, we went to the seaside to walk and swim. As we sat on the shore, two Turkish women—strikingly beautiful—came and sat near us. I hadn't noticed their glances, but my roommates were watching everything closely. One of them said:
"Every time you go into the water, one of them follows you in. Every time you come out, she comes out too."
I glanced at the woman. She smiled, then gave me a wink. My roommates swarmed me:
"Go on, talk to her!"
I replied, "I didn't come here for this. I’m focused on my path to Sweden."
They countered, "Keep dreaming! You’re stuck here for now. If we make friends with them, we could live with them and stop paying rent!"
"I don't speak Turkish," I said.
One of them replied, "I do, but she’s interested in you, not us."
They insisted so much that I looked at her again. She smiled once more, took a piece of paper from her friend, wrote something down, and while keeping her eyes on me, she slowly stood up and walked toward the changing rooms. My roommates urged, "Get up, follow her! She wants to give you the note."
I stood up and walked toward her. She stopped near the changing area, turned, said something in Turkish, and handed me the paper. I went back and gave the note to my roommates. They translated it: it was her home address, and she had written, "Come at 7:00 PM."
We returned to our room. From that moment on, my roommates wouldn't let it go. They insisted I get ready so we could all go to her house together. I refused. I handed them the address and said:
"If you're so eager, go yourselves."
But they replied, "She likes you. Unless you go, she won't give us the time of day.
They kept insisting until I finally gave in. We went. The apartment was on the second floor. Outside the door, there were several pairs of shoes, including a man's pair. I said:
"It’s a trap! She clearly has a husband."
At that exact moment, the sound of an argument erupted

from inside. We scrambled down the stairs and stood in front of the building. The woman’s friend came down and said:
"My friend has a guest. Come to my place; she’ll be over in a minute."
We went back to the second floor with her. Her apartment was right across from her friend’s. She invited us to sit. My Armenian friend started speaking in broken Turkish:
"Your eyes are like a gazelle's... You are a beautiful woman..."
The door opened, and the woman who had given me the note entered the room. She walked toward me, took my hand, and said:
"Don't worry. That man is my ex-husband. He just came to pick up his things and see his child."
She asked us to go to her place. There were three of us and two of them. She opened her window, whistled, and called out to a woman cleaning her windows across the street, asking her to come over. A few minutes later, that woman joined us too.
My roommate, who knew a bit of Turkish, started making grand promises:
"My father is rich. I’m going to Germany, and I’ll take you with me..."
The woman actually believed he was a rich kid. She asked him for money and told her friends, "These guys are loaded." Without hesitation, they said:
"If you aren't going to pay, you have to leave."
The two Armenian youths turned to me and said, "They want money from us."
We replied, "We don't have any."
"Then get out," they snapped.
"Fine, we're leaving," we said.
I stood up to go with my friends. At that moment, the woman who had given me her address grabbed my hand and said:
"You stay."
I looked at her and said calmly:
"If they are leaving, I am leaving with them."
No matter how much she insisted, saying "I like you, stay

with me," I refused. I walked out of that house with my friends.
From that day on, I spent most of my time indoors. The Turkish police would often stop us for no reason, demanding our passports; if we didn't pay them off, they wouldn't let us go. Many migrants were taken to prison without any explanation. So many people simply vanished, and no one ever heard what had become of them.
Because of this, I decided to hide my money in different places. I didn’t want anyone to know how much I had. The safest place was the house. I waited there, hoping that our situation would finally move forward and I could finally leave Turkey.

The Smugglers’ Flight with the Money and Passports

A few days passed. One day, as I was walking toward the agency, I saw a crowd gathered in front from a distance. With growing anxiety, I quickened my pace. When I arrived, I saw a scene I never wanted to witness: a woman was sitting on the ground in front of the door, weeping bitterly, beating her head and face, repeatedly crying out:
"We are ruined! We are hopeless... God curse Khomeini for making us refugees and trapping us with these heartless thieves!"
I entered the agency and asked:
"What happened?"
The young man who had introduced me to this agency—who was also part of the racket—said in a sharp tone:
"Are you blind? Can't you see? Seifi has fled, and he took all your money and passports with him!"
In shock, I said:
"Give me my money and passport; I want to leave."
He replied mockingly:

"It seems you're deaf too! I'm telling you, Seifi made off with the cash and the passports!"
I said:
"I heard what you said. But I didn't give my money to Seifi; I gave it to Lotfi, who is standing right here."
Lotfi chimed in:
"I gave your money to Seifi."
I shot back:
"I have nothing to do with Seifi. My money was in your hands."
At that moment, the young man working for them went to the back of the shop and returned with a large knife. The screams of the crowd grew louder. Several people warned:
"Watch out, he’s threatening you!"
I stepped back slightly, but he lunged forward with the knife and threatened:
"If you don't get out of this office, I'll stab you!"
I said:
"You have my money and my passport; where am I supposed to go?"
He barked:
"I swear to God, I'll do it!"
I slowly pulled up my shirt and said:
"Do it! What are you waiting for? Go ahead, stab me... I’m not leaving here until I get my money."
The reaction he saw from me was not what he expected. Lotfi signaled to him with a nod, indicating that the situation was becoming dangerous. Then, turning to me, he said:
"Let’s go to the back courtyard; we can talk there."
I had nothing left to lose. I said:
"Fine, let’s go."
We went to the courtyard behind the agency, where a few tables and chairs were set out. A few moments later, Lotfi himself came out and asked me to sit.
I said:
"I won’t sit as long as your assistant is holding that knife."
With a gesture from Lotfi, the assistant put the knife away and returned with tea.
Then Lotfi said:
"If you don't make a scene, I’ll help you get to Sweden. But

you have to pay the rest of the money."
I asked:
"How much?"
"$1,500," he said.
Surprised, I replied:
"I have no money left, and I certainly don't trust you anymore."
He said coolly:
"Then go ahead and do whatever you feel like doing."
I said:
"You promised to get me to Sweden within a week. A month has passed, I've been stuck here, and my living expenses have piled up. Now, not only are you refusing to pay damages, but you're demanding more? At least send me to Germany with the money I've already paid. I heard the border between East and West Germany is closing in a day or two."
"I won't send you," he replied.

:I stood up to leave, but he said
Go pack your things and come back. Tonight, I’m sending "
".you across the land border with another group
:I asked hesitantly
"?Are you planning to get rid of me for good"
:With a mysterious smile, he said
.No. You're going to Germany"

Leaving Turkey and Arrival in Romania

I accepted. As I was about to leave the agency, Lotfi told his worker:
"Take him out through the back door so no one sees him."
I went home through the back entrance and told my friends:
"I have to stay with one of the smugglers tonight; they’re taking me across the land border tomorrow."
They told me they had decided to return to Iran.
I grabbed my briefcase, said my goodbyes, and went back to

the agency. The shop was closed, but Lotfi was waiting in front of it in his car. He picked me up and drove me to another agency. He handed me over to his friend and said: "He’s with you tonight."
Then he turned to me and said:
"You’re lucky I took a liking to you; otherwise, I would’ve made sure you stayed in Turkish prisons for the rest of your life."
I simply said: "Thank you."
He left, and I, along with a few others and the next smuggler, crossed the land border into Romania. They settled us in the lobby of a hotel to wait for the next smuggler who would take us to Germany.
In Romania, we weren't allowed to buy anything with cash; we could only buy food using the meal coupons they had provided. The situation of the people there was deplorable. They were willing to do anything just to get a food coupon. A man with a polished look and a goatee was sitting across from us next to a teenage girl. He held a single dollar in his hand, gesturing toward the girl. One of my companions asked a hotel worker who they were. The worker replied: "The man is the girl's father. The price for the girl, including the room, is ten dollars... though they’ll take even less."
Everyone, from children to adults, was begging and chasing after our food coupons. It was then I realized that all the praise for communist countries about "having no beggars" was nothing but a lie.
A few hours later, a man arrived to take charge of us and lead us to East Germany. We all boarded a bus. outside, a crowd of beggars surrounded us, pleading for food coupons. I rolled down the window and handed mine to one of them; suddenly, a scuffle broke out among them.
Hours later, we reached the East German border. The police ordered everyone off and handed us over to the West German border guards. The very next day, the border was closed. Many were stranded in Turkey; those without money were ruined. Only those with financial means managed to save themselves.
On the way, a fellow migrant who had spent time in Turkish prisons and only escaped by paying a large sum said:

"You got lucky. The smugglers collaborate with the Turkish police. The police raid and arrest everyone, but the smugglers go free. A few weeks later, the cycle repeats. The police take money from both the smugglers and the poor travelers."
The German police took us to a large hall and told us to put everything we had on the table. Since I didn't intend to stay in Germany, I had hidden my money in my socks and placed nothing on the table. Later, they gathered our belongings and handed us over to a church. The next day, we were moved to another church in a small town.
During the journey, an Iranian man asked me:
"How much money did you give the police?"
"I didn't want to stay here, so I didn't give them my money," I replied.
He warned, "If they find out, it'll be bad."
"They haven't found out yet," I said.
A few hours later, a priest entered and announced:
"From today, you are under the protection of the church. We will cover all expenses. If you have any money, please put it in this bowl in the center of the hall so we can better assist you."
Fearing that the Iranian man might snitch on me, I hurried to the bathroom and hid my $800 there.
Some of the asylum seekers who still had money put theirs in the bowl. That same compatriot of mine said emotionally:
"This is unfair! These people are covering our expenses, why aren't you giving your money?"
I replied: "I lied to you, I don't have any money."
He insisted: "Let me see inside your socks."
I showed him. He was satisfied and finally left me alone.
We stayed in that church for about a week. During this time, many families brought us clothes and food. Some would take refugees to their homes, host them, and bring them back the next day. Some of our compatriots became close with the daughters of these families and even "gifted" them their religion.
During this period, we underwent medical tests. After a week, we were sent to different cities. I was transferred to a town called **Borgholm** (likely *Borgentreich* or similar) in the Hagen district, Westphalia—a place that was a

stronghold for far-right groups where protests were held every week.
The driver parked in front of the refugee camp. I entered with the official in charge. While he was talking to the camp manager, I noticed several Iranian residents stepping out of their rooms one by one to see the newcomer. I was thirty years old at the time, with a thick, black mustache. That mustache got me into trouble! The communists circled around me and invited me to their room to live with them. When my official left, I entered the room with several "thick-mustached" Iranians, most of whom were communists. They welcomed me with tea and sweets, and then hours of debate and interrogation began. When they saw how exhausted I was, they finally let me sleep.
When I woke up and washed my face, they told me I was their guest for breakfast. Over the meal, the interrogations began again. One of them asked:
"Which organization do you support?"
I replied: "I am not a member of any group or organization. I support a government that relies on the people's vote."
One asked: "Are you a Bakhtiari supporter?"
Another: "Are you a follower of Madani?"
A third: "Are you a Mossadeghist?"
I said: "Yes, I am a nationalist and a Mossadeghist. But I am neither a party member nor a professional activist. I just want to live in a free environment where I can cast my vote for someone I believe in."
That was enough for the attack to begin. One shouted: "Banisadr is a traitor! He’s the one who drenched Kurdistan in blood!"
I replied: "I didn't say I support Komala! I said I am a nationalist."
One sneered: "Man, this guy is a **Liberal**!"
Another: "He’s **Bourgeois**!"
A third: "He’s an **Imperialist**!"
They were practically starting to issue my death warrant when I asked:
"Excuse me, do you mind if I pray?"
One gasped: "Pray?!"
Another: "He’s joking."
A third: "You want to pray in *this* room?!"

A fourth: "He’s a regime spy! A Khomeini supporter?!"
And someone even said: "How is it possible for a Northerner to be religious and pray?!"
One of them finally spoke up: "Hey, what kind of behavior is this? When are you going to learn that everyone has the right to choose?"
The atmosphere grew heavier by the minute. Faces were flushed, and voices were raised. All that was missing was a Russian automatic weapon for them to carry out a "revolutionary execution" right then and there.
The noise escalated. A few others entered the room, and some defended me. The camp manager eventually arrived. He asked me to pack my things and move to a three-bed room where only one person was living.
I packed my belongings and followed the camp manager to the new room. No one was there. I picked one of the empty beds and tucked my things underneath. Then, I headed out of the camp to take a walk. I thought to myself:
"Thank God these people never rose to power; otherwise, they’d issue a death warrant for every opponent just by lighting a cigar. Khomeini had one Khalkhali, but each of these guys is a Khalkhali in his own right!"
I bought a few things for lunch and headed back. I saw a young man sitting on the bed. I greeted him and said:
"I’ll be living in this room from today. I hope we can be good friends."
He was a village boy who, after reading just one book, had become a die-hard communist! He believed he could bring happiness to the world; his only problem was wondering why no one would listen to him.
Given my experience in the previous room, I decided not to engage in political debates. I simply asked him to explain the camp's conditions to me.
"Let me show you," he said. He opened the door and began introducing the rooms.
Pointing to one, he said: "Two people live there who aren't political; they’re 'bourgeois brats' who want to go to America or Canada."
As he showed me around, I noticed the door to one room was completely trashed.
"What happened here?" I asked.

"That’s the monarchists' room," he said. "They drink, get wasted, and then start brawling. If they don’t have knives, they break liquor bottles and fight each other. Sometimes they clash with other rooms, too."
The rest of the day passed like that...
The next day, the camp manager called for me. I went to his office. He handed me several coupons and said:
"You can use these to buy a jacket, some underwear, and a few other essentials, but not from just any store. There is a specific shop."
I asked my roommate to show me the shop and come along if he wasn't busy. He agreed.
We went together to a large department store that sold both groceries and clothing. I took a large trolley and began picking out items. However, I soon realized that a man was following me. Everywhere I went, he was there too.
I asked: "What’s going on? Why is this man following us everywhere?"
My roommate replied: "He thinks we’re thieves; he’s keeping an eye on us."
I felt deeply insulted. I asked: "Do Iranians actually steal from these stores?"
He answered: "Yeah, but well, these people are capitalists, it doesn't matter to them..."
I thought to myself: "In Iran, I spent years under the magnifying glass of the local committee; do I have to watch my back here too?"
That day, wherever I went in the store, that same man followed me. Once, when we came face to face, I flipped the trolley over at his feet, dumped the items I had chosen onto the floor, and walked out of the store in protest. My roommate liked my reaction and said: "There’s another store where you can use your coupons."
I said: "No need. I won’t buy anything at all."
We headed back toward the camp. As we got close, an old man leaning on a cane approached us. My roommate warned: "Watch out, this old man is one of those anti-foreigner types."
As soon as the old man reached us, without saying a word, he spat on the ground—right at our feet.
I said: "What a day this is!"

He replied: "This is just the beginning. Sometimes anti-foreigner groups come from other cities and attack the camps. They've set camps on fire several times. It's very unsafe at night; they attack migrants with knives.
I said: "So there is no peace here either."
"No," he replied.
Those words were enough to discourage me further. Given my historical knowledge of the Nazi era, I became determined to leave Germany as soon as possible. Instead of buying clothes, I spent my coupons only on food.
It was Friday. I called my eldest sister's house, knowing my brother Torab would likely be there. He was. He took the phone. I told him:
"I've reached Germany; I'm in a refugee camp. The conditions are not good; there's a lot of anti-foreigner sentiment. They only give us three hundred Marks a month, which has to cover both clothes and food. I have no money left to get myself to Sweden. Can you send me some pistachios and clothes? I can sell them and save up some money."
Torab said: "What kind of talk is that? You're my brother. Give me the address; I'll send you high-quality pistachios so you can easily make it to Sweden."
I quickly wrote a letter and sent the exact address of the camp.
A few days later, one of the guys in the camp handed me a letter. It was tightly sealed with Scotch tape. At first, I thought Torab wanted his letter to stay private. I asked: "Did you tape this letter yourself?"
My roommate said: "No, that's the work of the regime's Ministry of Intelligence. They open all the letters and then tape them back up."
I opened the letter. Torab had written that my letter arrived and he would be sending the pistachios soon.
A few days later, during a small celebration held at the camp, I met a young man from Isfahan. He said he was a supporter of the **Mujahedin** organization. I was pleased. I asked: "You have connections with the organization, and they cooperate with Mr. **Banisadr**. Can you find out how I can contact Banisadr's supporters? Do they have a newspaper or a publication?"

He said: "I don’t know. They used to, but not anymore. I’ll ask and let you know."
But he never brought back any news. I realized he simply didn't want to help me.
One day, there was a Mercedes-Benz promotional catalog on the table. I liked one of the photos, tore it out, and taped it to the wall next to my bed. When my roommate saw it, he got angry:
"You are a bourgeois brat!"
No matter how much I explained that the wall was bare and I just liked the picture, he wouldn't accept it.
The next day, he came back from language class and said: "Our teacher, who is a beautiful girl, put her hand on my shoulder!"
Then, with a specific look, he asked me: "What do you think she meant by that?"
He wanted me to say, "She likes you," but I said: "Maybe she didn't mean anything at all."
He got upset. The next day, he repeated the same story.
Eventually, one of the guys in the camp said to me:
"How can you stand being roommates with this crazy guy? Come to our room!"
I said: "For days, he's been telling me his teacher is in love with him!"
He replied: "Take him to the Red-Light District. Maybe he'll feel better!"
Surprised, I asked: "Germany has brothels?"
"Yes," he said, "it’s legal. And it’s close to here." He gave me the address.
A few days later, when he was nagging again, I said: "Let’s go out for a walk and talk a bit." He agreed.
We went to the Red-Light District. At the first house, a woman in lingerie was standing behind the window. He asked: "Where is this place?"
I said: "I don't know, but that red light above the door means it’s here."
It was very fascinating to him. It was an alley with over a hundred houses; the workplace and homes of sex workers. We walked to the end of the alley. He was looking at the women shyly and secretly.
When we got back to the beginning of the alley, I said: "If

you want, let's take another lap."
"No, that's enough!" he said. "Let's go back to the camp."
His face had turned bright red.
From that day on, everyone noticed he had become much calmer and no longer picked arguments with anyone.
But another day, a fight broke out. It was a clash between the communists and the monarchists—a heavy, violent brawl. I stood outside the camp, waiting for things to calm down. The "bourgeois" young man who wanted to go to Canada was also there. He said:
"This is no place to stay. I'm counting the days until I leave."
I asked: "You mean you want to leave Germany?"
"Yes," he replied. "My main destination is America because my family is there. But first, I have to go to Canada. Right now, I'm waiting for money to be sent from Iran."
I told him: "I wanted to go to Sweden, but I'm stuck here. I'm waiting for pistachios to arrive from Iran so I can sell them and save up some money."
"How much money do you have?" he asked.
"Four hundred dollars," I said.
He replied: "I have about six hundred dollars."
His name was **Ali**. Gradually, we became friends. Sometime later, he suggested we become roommates. I agreed. Ali was also fluent in English. I showed him photos of the machines I had built back in Iran and asked:
"Can you write the descriptions I give you for these photos in English on the back? I want to send them to the embassies of three countries; maybe they'll grant me residency without needing to apply for asylum."
He agreed. He wrote on the back of the photos, and together we found the addresses for the immigration offices in **Australia, Canada, and Sweden** and mailed them.
It wasn't long before responses arrived from all three countries:
"You are currently in Germany, and we cannot bring you from there. However, if you manage to enter our borders yourself, you are welcome."
I realized that, for now, I had to keep waiting for those pistachios.

I called my eldest sister and said: "For God’s sake, tell Torab to send the pistachios sooner. The situation in the camp is horrific; it’s turned into a madhouse."
My sister replied: "Torab says he has already sent ten kilograms of pistachios."
I asked: "Do you know when he sent them? My letters here are opened and taped shut before they reach me. What if they’ve taken the pistachios too?"
I then asked if the letters I sent to Iran arrived with tape on them.
She said: "Your letters reach us without any tape."
I was puzzled. I thought to myself: "If this is the regime's doing, why aren't they opening the letters I send *to* Iran?"
I told Ali about it. He said: "You're right; they put tape on my letters too."
I said: "I’m suspicious. Let's ask the camp manager when the mailman arrives."
We went to the manager and asked. He said: "What’s happened? Isn't [the person in charge] delivering the letters?"
We said: "He is, we just want to see the mailman ourselves."
He told us: "He comes between 8:00 and 9:00 AM."
The next day, I hid in a corner of the hall. I saw that same refugee—the one who claimed to be a Mujahedin supporter and was responsible for distributing the mail—take the letters from the mailman. Instead of distributing them, he took them all to his own room. A few minutes later, he left the camp and returned about an hour later. Only then did he start handing out the mail.
The following day, when the mailman arrived, I went straight to him. I asked: "Check if there's a letter for me."
He said: "I have to sort them first before distribution."
I insisted. He replied mockingly: "I know you're looking for your pistachios. But ten kilograms of pistachios won't fit in these envelopes!
I took the letters from his hand and saw that none of them were taped. I handed them back. With the same mocking tone, he asked: "Didn't find your pistachios?"
I smiled and said: "You're right; ten kilograms of pistachios won't fit in an envelope. The mailman probably delivered them separately and got a signature."

I went back to my room, but I watched him through the crack in the door to see what he would do. A few minutes later, he left the camp with his backpack. I followed him from a distance. He entered a building and returned about an hour later. He went to his room, picked up the letters, and distributed them.
As luck would have it, my roommate also had a letter. Since he wasn't in the room, they left it on his bed. I picked up the envelope; it was taped shut.
I told Ali: "I've discovered where the tape saga comes from."
Ali got angry: "I'm going to tell the camp manager. From now on, only he should distribute the mail."
I said: "Wait. We don't know the full story yet. I think he's making copies of all the letters. It's unlikely to be just curiosity."
I could hardly believe this was related to the Mujahedin organization.
From that day on, I tried to get closer to him, hoping to find something out. Eventually, one day, several members of the organization entered the camp and went straight to his room. Shortly after, he came out and invited us all to his room.
There, they said: "The country is in danger; the situation is critical. A number of people from Europe are going to join the Mujahedin fighters in Iraq. Tomorrow, we have a meeting about the conditions in Iran. We'd be happy if you came. If anyone wants to join, they can fill out the registration form right there."
They gave us the address for the meeting...
The next day, we went to the address they had provided. To my utter surprise, I saw it was the exact same building where the mail distributor took the envelopes every day.
There were about seven or eight people at the meeting. One of them spoke for a few minutes, then they turned off the lights and played a video; a powerful film that would affect any ordinary person. They invited everyone to join the struggle against the regime.
When the film ended, the lights came up, and everyone's eyes were filled with tears. A heavy silence hung in the room. Even one of the guys who, until yesterday, spent all

his time at discos and drinking, was so transformed that he filled out the application to be sent to Iraq right then and there, refusing to listen to any advice.
I, too, was deeply moved by the atmosphere of the meeting. Had it not been for the matter of the letters and the tape, I might have preferred going to Iraq over going to Sweden. Fortunately, I was not deceived and returned to the camp.
The next day, I said to the mail distributor—whom I now knew was an organization member—with biting irony:
"I should write a letter to the Iranian embassy and apologize to the regime for my mistaken judgment!"
Surprised and upset, he asked: "What happened? Yesterday you wanted to go to Iraq, and today you want to go back to Iran?"
I replied: "No, I just don't want to use lies for the sake of a struggle anymore."
"What lies?" he asked.
I said: "When I received those taped letters, I thought it was the work of the Iranian regime. You even told me yourself it was their doing. But now I know it's the work of your own organization."
In a defensive tone, he said: "You're wrong. It's their doing."
I replied: "The regime's hands are stained with every kind of crime, but this one is on you. Aren't you ashamed of spying on defenseless people who fled that very regime?"
He said: "I would give my life and my family for the organization. It is my duty to watch out for the regime's mercenaries."
I realized he was actually acting like I owed him something!
I raised my voice and called everyone to come out of their rooms:
"Everyone, listen! It’s not the Iranian regime opening your letters; it’s this man right here, spying for the Mujahedin organization!"
He shouted back in response:
"He's the spy himself! He wants to write a letter to the embassy!"
My friend grabbed my arm and pulled me into his room. There, he said anxiously:
"Don't cross them. These are dangerous people; they might

actually assassinate you. We have to escape this madhouse at any cost."
Life in the camp grew harder and more unsafe every day. Holidays were spent dealing with the monarchists' drinking bouts and nightly brawls; ordinary days were filled with group debates and verbal clashes. There was no peace outside the camp either; the old man who hated foreigners passed by the camp several times a day just to spit at us. I was afraid that one day my patience would snap and I'd take all those insults out on him at once.
Ali and I waited for the pistachios every single day. Our hope was pinned on my brother. But nothing arrived. The guys in the camp started mocking us:
"Your pistachios arrived, but since you weren't here, the mailman took them back!"
I had lost hope in the pistachios and my brother. Ali had too.
He suggested:
"Instead of relying on a family we don't have, let's rely on ourselves."
"What should we do?" I asked.
"Every empty beer or soda can is worth fifty pfennigs," he said. "Let's go out on holiday nights when people drink a lot of beer and look for empty cans. Believe me, we can save ourselves even with this small change."
I said: "I don't have a problem with it, but I'm ashamed. An Iranian man, rummaging through trash for cans?"
He replied: "Let's wait one more week. If there's still no news of the pistachios, we start."
A week passed. Still, no news.
We decided to sleep during the holidays and spend the nights, from dusk until dawn, collecting cans from the streets and trash bins. In the morning, before anyone at the camp could notice, we would drop the cans into recycling machines, collect the money, and return. We earned a good income. After a month, our financial problems were solved.
During this time, I also managed to help a few others apply for residency in Germany. I called my sister, Rokhsareh, several times. Once, I spoke to her about going to Sweden. She said:
"We have a relative in Sweden; he's in his final semester of

university and lives with the daughter of a factory owner. He’s a good guy. He’ll help you."
She gave me his number and asked me to call him as soon as possible.
I called him, and after introducing myself, I said:
"I don’t want to be a burden. I just need guidance on what to do for residency once I enter Sweden."
He welcomed me warmly and said:
"I will certainly help you."
A few days later, I asked him for his address so I could mail some of my important documents—like my birth certificate, driver’s license, and so on. I didn't want these documents to fall into the hands of the police during the journey. He agreed and gave me the address; Ali wrote it down. The next day, I sent my documents by registered mail.

Escaping Germany: The Journey into the Swedish Cold

I had reached an agreement with the smuggler to pay for my trip to Sweden using my monthly allowance from the camp. A few days before departure, I called my sister’s relative in Sweden and said:
"I’m coming to Sweden with a smuggler in a few days. I just have one request."
"What is it?" he asked.
I said: "I have the money, but I don’t want to pay him all at once. I’m afraid he might abandon me halfway and disappear. We agreed that I’ll pay half now, and you can give him the rest once I safely arrive in Sweden."
He agreed.
The day of departure arrived. I collected my monthly allowance from the camp, about three hundred Marks. Early that morning, I said goodbye to my friend who was heading to Canada and set off for Cologne, to the hotel where the smuggler was staying.
He asked: "Did you bring the money?"
I replied: "As we discussed with your associate, I’ll give you

half now. My relative will give you the rest when I arrive."
"Give me his number; I need to talk to him," he said.
I made the call and handed him the phone. After confirming the arrangement, the smuggler said: "I accept," and took the money.
He told me I had to stay in the guesthouse that night because his car had broken down and we would leave the next day. He charged me another 150 Marks just for that one night's stay.
I couldn't sleep a wink until morning. I kept thinking: *What if I wake up and* he's gone with the money? Must I return to the camp and go back to collecting beer cans at night?
I hid the train ticket I used to get to Cologne behind one of the window frames; if I got caught, I could use it to prove I was a resident of Germany.
I don't know when I finally fell asleep, but I was woken up in the morning by a knock on the door. I opened it; it was him. He smiled and said:
"I'm waiting downstairs. Let's have breakfast and head out.
I felt a surge of relief. We went downstairs, and while we were having breakfast, his girlfriend joined us. We all got into the car and started driving toward Sweden. We reached Denmark, traveled part of the way by ferry, and finally entered Sweden. Around 10:00 PM, they dropped me off in the center of Stockholm.
The smuggler asked: "Isn't your relative here?"
"No," I replied. "But don't worry, I have the rest of the money with me."
I paid him. I asked him for some Swedish Krona so I could make a phone call. Seeing I had no cigarettes, he bought me a pack and gave me four Krona for the payphone. He told me: "If the police ask how you entered Sweden, tell them you arrived by plane."
It wasn't just cold; it was freezing. With only one pair of trousers, a shirt, and a thin jacket, I had to endure a bone-chilling cold. My breath hit my cigarette and seemed to turn to ice instantly. I thought to myself: What a huge mistake I've made. How am I supposed to live in this country?
I dialed my relative's number. He picked up, heard my voice, and hung up. I called again; a Swedish woman answered. I said: "Masoud, Masoud!"

She handed him the phone. I greeted him.
"Who is this?" he asked.
"It’s Mansour," I replied.
He was shocked: "You mean you’ve reached Sweden? You’re in Stockholm right now?"
"Yes," I said.
He couldn't believe it. After a few moments of silence, he said: "The thing is, I’m living at my girlfriend's house and..."
I interrupted: "Don't worry. I won't be a burden. I just wanted your guidance."
He simply said: "Go to the police," and hung up.
I wasn't even upset; I was used to betrayal. I told myself: When my own loved ones don't have my back, what can I expect from a stranger?
A sense of helplessness, cold, and darkness... I didn't even have the strength to walk. That night was the coldest of my life. My briefcase had become a burden; its handle was frozen, and I couldn't even put my hand in my pocket. The city was icy and silent. Everyone was in their warm homes while I wandered the streets, aimless and lost.
I couldn't stand still because of the cold; I had to keep moving. I circled the city's central square—Sergels Torg—several times. Finally, I spotted a police car parked by the road and ran toward it. With hands numb from the frost and a tongue that wouldn't cooperate, I managed to say:
"Police... police..."
One of the officers gestured for me to keep going straight to find the station. I went, but found nothing. I returned, and this time, I simply opened the car door and sat inside. Shivering uncontrollably, I said:
"I am a refugee..."
At first, the officer didn't understand. From behind the steering wheel, he asked in puzzled Swedish why I had climbed in. As I slowly began to warm up, I said it more clearly:
"I am... a refugee."
I held out my hands, expecting them to handcuff me. It seemed strange to them; as if it was their first time encountering a refugee this way. The other officer got in, and they radioed in to ask what they should do with me.

After a while, they took me to the police station. We entered a room, and they introduced me to a man sitting behind a desk. The officers left, and I was alone with someone whose language I didn't understand. He was polite and kind. In English, he asked me:
"Which country are you from?"
"Iran," I replied.
He made a phone call and, after a moment, handed me the receiver. A man's voice on the other end said in Persian:
"Hello. I am an interpreter, and I am here to help you over the phone.
Hearing my mother tongue gave me a strange sensation; it was as if my entire body finally began to warm up. The interpreter said:
"It’s very late now. We just want to find you a place to sleep for the night. Tomorrow, we will talk in more detail with me present."
He then asked: "They want to look inside your briefcase; do you give them permission?"
"Yes," I replied.
I opened the case myself. The officer stood up, took a quick look, and closed it. After making several calls, he finally found a place for me. He asked the officers to take me to the address he had written down, said his goodbyes, and left.
The officers drove me in that same car to a **nursing home**, where I spent the night.
The next morning, they took me to the **Refugee Service Center**. This time, two people were there to greet me with smiles. The Iranian interpreter introduced himself, mentioning he was in his final semester of a Master's degree.
The questioning began. At the end, they explained that while those who apply at borders or airports are usually processed faster, I was the first person to be referred from within the city itself. Therefore, I would have to stay in Stockholm for a few weeks until my turn came.
They gave me some cash for two weeks' expenses and several bus tickets. As I took the money, a strange feeling washed over me. One of the officials said something to the interpreter. The interpreter asked:

"Did this upset you?"
I replied: "It’s because I’ve never received money for work I haven't done. I hope to pay this back one day."
The interpreter translated my words, and the man said: "Don't worry. I know Iranians well. I lived in Iran for several years. I know you are a people of high culture and dignity. Rest assured, once you find a job, you will return this many times over through your **taxes**.
Then, the police took me to a hotel at **Brommaplan** square to stay for two weeks. The interpreter, who had taken a liking to me, gave me his phone number and told me to call whenever I needed help. He even invited me to his graduation ceremony.
It was a small room with a bed and a small TV on the wall. Breakfast was served at the hotel. Out of sheer exhaustion, I stayed in my room for an entire day. I didn't even allow anyone to come in for cleaning because I didn't want my peace to be disturbed.
It felt as if I had been **born again**; it was just me, and me alone.
The next day, I went out and walked a bit around the hotel, but the intense cold and my lack of proper clothing forced me to return quickly. I used some of my money to buy a jacket from a second-hand shop.
Two days later, I decided to call my sister’s relative. I just wanted him to say I was fine if anyone from Iran called.
I called from a public payphone. His first question was: "Where are you?"
I replied: "I am comfortable where I am. I just wanted you to tell them I’m okay if they ask from Iran."
He said: "I want to see you."
"I don’t want to be a burden," I said.
"Don't say that! I must definitely see you," he insisted.
I realized his father must have scolded him for not checking on me. I agreed. He gave me his work number so I could call him.
I took the bus to the city’s central square and called him from there. He said:
"Stay right there by the phone booth; I’m coming."
I waited, but there was no sign of him. I called again. He said:

"I came, but I didn't see you!"
While talking, I realized there were two phone booths on opposite sides of the square. I told him I was near the library.
"Ah," he said, "I completely forgot there were two booths."
A while later, he arrived. We shook hands, exchanged greetings, and he said:
"My father called several times. He was upset when he found out I hadn't heard from you. I’m glad you’ve made it."
We walked together to his workplace, a rug shop. He introduced me to the shop owner. We sat down, drank tea, and talked. I told him about the situation in Iran, and he caught me up on everything that had happened during that time.
I asked: "Do you know of any work?"
He replied: "First, you must learn the language. Everything will fall into place."
Just then, a customer entered and went downstairs. The shop owner said:
"You two stay here; I’ll go."
My relative insisted: "No, I’ll go," and headed downstairs.
The owner and I sat and talked. He asked:
"What are you doing now?"
"Nothing," I replied. "Idleness grinds my nerves. The only thing that brings me peace is working."
He asked: "What skills do you have?"
I said: "I can do anything technical."
"Like what?" he pressed.
"Repairing electrical appliances, construction work," I told him.
He asked: "Do you know carpentry too?"
"Yes," I replied, "I know carpentry as well."
He gave a small smile and said:
« I know someone who could use your skills, but your situation needs to be settled first, and for now, you must stay in Stockholm. Once your status is clear, I’ll call him and introduce you."
I asked, "Where is he?"
"Near that phone booth you called from; the city center," he replied.
"Can't you call him right now?" I pressed.

He hesitated for a moment, as if waiting for my relative to come up from downstairs to consult with him. But since it was taking a while and I kept insisting, he picked up the phone and made a call. He told the person on the other end that he had found someone suitable for the job. The person on the line said:
"Send him over, I want to see him."
I took down the address.
Meanwhile, my relative came up with the customer. No purchase was made, and no rug was sold. I stood up to say goodbye. My relative asked:
"Where are you going?"
"Back to the hotel," I said.
"No," he insisted, "we're spending tonight together."
I told him, "I don't want to be a burden."
He insisted, and I finally accepted.
After the shop owner said his goodbyes, it was just me and my relative. He started boasting about himself:
"My father is very wealthy. Ever since I came to Sweden, he sends me money every month. I'm a student, and girls are crazy about me!"
Half an hour before closing, he went downstairs and did some cleaning. Then he called a few of his friends, and finally, we closed the shop. We got into his car and went to his place. He introduced me to his girlfriend. They also had two Persian cats. We talked for a bit. He went to the kitchen, cooked, and we had dinner together.
He told his girlfriend he had plans with his friends. she didn't object. One of his friends called, and my relative said we had to go. I said:
"I don't want to be a nuisance."
He laughed and said, "Come on, it'll be fun."
We went to a friend's house in the **Rinkeby** neighborhood—a one-bedroom student apartment. We sat and waited for the others. The friends arrived one by one. They asked:
"Do you play cards?"
"No," I replied.
Four of them sat around the table and started the game. Cigarettes were lit one after another. Then it was time for hashish. The room filled with smoke. Between the thick

haze and my own exhaustion, my head grew heavy; I felt a contact high and drifted off to sleep right there on the sofa. When I woke up in the morning, everyone was gone. Only the host and I remained—a man in his thirties named Amir, who introduced himself as a former boxing champion from Iran. He said:
"We were gambling until four in the morning."
My relative’s old car wouldn't start. It was a struggle; they had to push it to get it going because he had to get to work. I finally realized that this was their nightly routine: they worked during the day, earning money with a thousand hardships, only to blow it all on gambling and hashish at night. My relative, instead of spending his money on fixing his car, gambled it away. They won and lost each other's money, smoked hashish, and actually felt proud of themselves for it...

The Antique Shop: My First Days in Sweden

I started working just three days after arriving in Sweden. I went to a shop whose address I had gotten from my relative’s employer. The owner was an Iranian man who had lived in Sweden for many years. He told me he was once a student but couldn't finish his studies. He used to work for a Swedish man who dug wells and eventually married his daughter. His father would send him carpets from Iran; he registered a company in his wife’s name and built his business by selling those carpets.
Now, he owned a three-story shop in central Stockholm and a house in the upscale Lidingö district. He had divorced his first wife and was living with his second. After a short talk, he said:
"**You can come and start working tomorrow.**"
I couldn’t believe it. After all those hardships, I could finally work. I was happy.

The next day, I went to the basement, which served as both a warehouse and a workshop for antique furniture. He introduced me to two people: a retired Swedish man who occasionally came in to repair expensive furniture, and his Iranian assistant. He told the old man:
"This young man wants to work here for a week. If you're satisfied with his work, he can stay."
The old man handed me six old chairs with loose legs that weren't very valuable. I said:
"Repairing these is an easy job."
Their work was incredibly neat and professional; they wore white coats as if they were performing surgery! I put one of the chairs on the table and started screwing the parts together. But the old man told the Iranian colleague to tell me:
"In the old days, there were no screws, and using them ruins the look of the chair. If a customer sees screws, they won't buy it."
The Iranian colleague said mockingly:
"**It’s obvious you’ve never repaired antique furniture before!**"
I replied:
"**I’ll do it in a way that no one will ever see the screws.**
I removed the screws, drilled holes into the back of the legs, countersunk the screws deep into the wood, and covered them with round wooden plugs. I then used dark, aged stains to give them an antique finish. I repaired and handed over all six chairs that same day. The old man didn't notice my use of screws, but my Iranian colleague was clearly unhappy with my speed.
A few days later, I saw the old man repairing an antique desk. He had tossed the broken original lock into the trash and was using a hammer and chisel to carve out a space for a new one. The new lock was much larger. I stepped forward and said:
"Let me make a key for the original lock. Installing a new one will devalue the desk."
The Iranian colleague refused to translate my words. So, I went upstairs myself and spoke to Mr. Mohsen, the shop owner. At first, he said:
"Don't interfere with the old man's work."

I insisted on at least trying. He agreed and came down to the workshop to translate for me. The old man accepted. I went through a pile of old keys, selected a few, and after some filing and adjustments, I crafted two working keys. I oiled the original lock and put it back in its place.
The old man didn't come in the next day. But when the end of the week arrived, it was time for him to give his report to the owner. It was Friday. The elevator opened, and Mr. Mohsen walked in. First, he asked the Iranian colleague for his opinion of me. He replied:
"He works far too hurriedly."
Then he asked the old man. He said:
"He did in one week what I haven't been able to do in my entire career."
I asked my Iranian colleague: "What did he say?"
He replied reluctantly: "He said he’s satisfied with your work."
Mohsen intervened: "Satisfied? No, he is beyond satisfied! He says you did something he couldn't do himself."
Later, the Swedish man whispered in my ear:
"**Your fellow countryman tried very hard to sabotage you.**
The two weeks I had spent at the hotel came to an end. It was time to meet with the asylum officer. An Iranian interpreter accompanied me. Before the officer arrived, I spoke with him for a moment.
I asked, "What happens now?"
He said, "Tomorrow or the day after, they’ll send you to a camp with another group."
"Where?" I asked.
"I don’t know, but it will be in another city. If you go, your residency process will move faster, and you’ll learn the language. But if you don't, things might get harder for you."
I told him, "I don’t want to go to a small town. I need to be somewhere busy. I can’t live in a ghost town."
He suggested, "Then don't show up on the day you're supposed to leave. They won't wait for you. You'll be forced to stay in Stockholm."
I showed him photos of the machines I had built back in Iran and told him I wanted to show them to the asylum officer. Maybe they would let me stay here and start a

manufacturing business.
He replied, "Get your residency first, then come back. We can set it up together then."
But I didn't go. I stayed in Stockholm for another two weeks, working at the same repair shop and sleeping at the hotel.
Mr. Mohsen told me, "Try to stay in Stockholm and work for me."
I said, "If I don't go to the camp, my residency will be delayed, and I won't learn the language."
Finally, I decided to head to the camp to expedite my residency process.
Two weeks later, I turned myself in. I joined a group of refugees on a bus traveling to various Swedish cities. A few people got off at each stop until we reached the final destination: Kalmar. A Swedish couple picked me up and drove me to a camp in the outskirts called Borgholm. The drive took about an hour.
The camp was a two-story wooden building housing many refugees, including several Iranians. It sat beside a completely frozen sea where people were actually walking on the ice! An official took me to a room shared by three others, all from different cities in Iran.
The first few days were pleasant. We took walks together, and on weekends, the local church and residents sent us food and aid. However, there wasn't a single house for miles around the camp. Gradually, refugees began befriending local families, sometimes even spending nights at their homes.
The camp was also home to several veiled women and married mothers with small children. Most were waiting for their residency so they could later bring their husbands to Sweden. But the long, lonely life in the camp often led to new friendships with other residents. These temporary bonds sometimes turned into deeper relationships, making them forget those waiting for them back in Iran. Husbands who had sold everything they owned to send their families away for a better future were sometimes forgotten. This was one of the bitterest consequences of long-term camp life. I saw with my own eyes how several families fell apart

as some of these women, upon receiving residency, moved to other cities taking their new partners with them.
One day, I told my roommates: "Wait for the sea ice to melt; you'll see these hijabs melt away right along with it." Everyone laughed, but a few months later, they realized I wasn't wrong.
The days passed without any language classes. We simply marked time from sunrise to sunset. We were told this camp was temporary and that language classes would only begin once we moved to a permanent facility. One of my roommates was constantly traveling back and forth to Stockholm. I asked him, "Isn't such a long trip exhausted for you?
He said, "No, I have relatives in Stockholm. I wash dishes in a restaurant during the day and stay with them at night. I only come back here once or twice a month so the officials don't get suspicious."
I said, "I'm coming with you this time."
He agreed, and we headed to Stockholm together.
I went back to the same shop where I had worked a few weeks prior. The owner was happy to see me and asked, "Do you want to work again?"
I replied, "Yes, but I have nowhere to stay."
He said, "I'll fix that for you."
He mentioned that his son was dating a girl who had an unused house in Märsta. He called her, and she graciously agreed to rent it to me. More than half of my income went toward rent, but I was happy to be working.
Later, I was moved from the temporary camp to a permanent one in a small town near Uppsala called Gimo. Everyone in that small town knew each other. The camp manager told us, "Try not to wear expensive clothes. The locals might get upset seeing refugees looking well-off." Despite that, we never encountered any bad behavior from the Swedes.
I didn't stay there long. The young men in the camp were mostly looking for fun and relationships; it felt more like a youth club than a refugee shelter. Some were dating multiple girls at once and exploiting them financially. I couldn't stand it, so I returned to Stockholm to continue my

work. I would visit the camp once a month just to register my presence.
One day, Mr. Mohsen said, "Give the Migration Agency my home address in Lidingö. Tell them you live there; it will make your case move smoother." I did exactly that. A few months later, my residency was granted. At the same time, because the girl wanted her house back, Mr. Mohsen rented me a small apartment belonging to one of his relatives in Solna. It was only twenty minutes from work, though my official address remained his luxury home in Lidingö.
One day, I ran into Amir, the boxing champion who was a friend of my brother-in-law's relative. I told him, "I'm looking for a place to live."
He said, "Take my student apartment. I'm moving in with my girlfriend and don't need it anymore. The rent is low."
Since half of my income was going toward rent, I accepted. Finally, after a period of being adrift, I found a permanent spot. Now I could have my mail sent to one specific address; before, I always had to bounce between different locations just to find my letters.
I remember one day, I had just picked up my mail from one of those addresses and was walking toward the bus stop. Just as I arrived, the bus was pulling away. I didn't rush, as I've never liked rushing...
As I paced the station, lost in thought, a police car suddenly pulled up in front of me. An officer stepped out and approached.
In a dry, serious tone, he asked, "What are you doing here?"
I was taken aback, as if I had done something wrong. In my broken language, I replied, "I'm waiting for the bus."
"Which bus?" he asked.
"Bus number [X]," I said.
"Then why didn't you get on?"
I replied, "I wasn't in a hurry. Why are you even asking this?"
He answered, "We got a call. They gave us your description and said there's a suspicious individual here."
Just then, the next bus arrived. I headed toward it, but the police stayed there to make sure I actually got on. I thought to myself, "**What a world this is...**

I felt humiliated and insecure. I thought to myself, 'This is a wealthy neighborhood; these people travel abroad several times a year. Seeing a foreigner shouldn't be anything new to them. If this is how they act, heaven help the places where they've never even seen a foreigner!'
From □□ on, I lost my heart for that neighborhood. A sense of insecurity, loneliness, and alienation took over me. I told myself, 'If this is how the day feels, I dread to think about the night...'
The new neighborhood where Amir's apartment was located was an area where mostly foreigners lived. This made me feel much safer. No one gave me heavy stares, and no police followed me. The streets were full of people who looked like me—from different countries, with different languages and clothes.
I worked hard during the day, and at night, I sat alone at home. I constantly wrote letters to the many people I hadn't been able to reach. I tried to warm the cold, silent atmosphere of exile with a few Persian words. I missed so many things, even the hardships back in Iran. Despite all the suffering I had endured, I sometimes thought, 'Maybe instead of coming here, I could have gone to another city in Iran, found a quiet corner, and just lived.'
But I moved past those thoughts, knowing that going back was not the answer.

Meeting a Follower of the Path of Independence and Freedom

One day, while talking to a friend of my employer about the situation in Iran, he said to me:
"From what you've said, I can tell you're a supporter of Mr. Banisadr."
"Yes, that's right," I replied.
He continued, "Actually, my wife's nephew is also a supporter of Banisadr; he even reads his newspaper."
I asked in surprise, "Really? Is the *Enghelab-e-Eslami* newspaper still being published?"
"Yes," he said.
"I must see him, no matter what. I want to read that paper.

Can I meet your wife’s nephew?"
"Sure, why not?"
"Where does he live?" I asked.
"Only one train stop away from your house."
Upon hearing this, I begged him to introduce us. He gave me the man’s home phone number. I called him and asked if he could come over, but he said, "I can’t, but you should come visit me." I accepted and took his address. Feeling joyful, I set off toward his house on foot.
Near his home, there was a bridge I had to cross. When I reached the middle of the bridge, I glanced down for a moment and froze. My God, was it possible? Was I dreaming or awake? I rubbed my eyes and looked down again. Yes, it was the exact scene I had seen in a dream with my father: a police car and two officers positioned under the bridge.
I began to walk slowly, asking myself: Why did my father—who always walked me all the way home in my dreams—smile and part ways with me in that last dream, never to return? And what was the connection between him and that paper tucked under the lock?
I arrived at my fellow countryman’s house, but my mind was still stuck back on that bridge. My host asked, "Are you lost in thought?" I said, "No, it’s nothing." As he was preparing tea, my eyes fell on the *Enghelab-e-Eslami* newspaper. I immediately picked it up and started reading the editorial. He took it from my hands and said, "This just arrived; I haven't read it yet." I pleaded with him to give me any previous issues he had. Sensing my overwhelming thirst for it, he said, "Fine, take this one too. I'll get another copy for myself.
Yes, that bridge became the crossing between me and the first true choice of my life—a choice that called me toward independence and freedom.
A few days passed until one day, returning from work, I opened the door to find the *Enghelab-e-Eslami in Exile* magazine among the mail and advertisements. The only struggle was that the paper was published bi-weekly, and I had to wait impatiently for the next issue. Sometimes it took three weeks because the friend who delivered it was

busy working at his brother’s pastry shop and couldn't always make it on time.
I often waited by the door, hoping to catch him, talk to him, and ask about the delays, but I didn't always succeed. Until one day, I finally did. As he dropped the paper, I opened the door and called out to him. He said, 'I’m in a huge rush.' I replied, 'I have a few questions.' He promised, 'I’ll come by tomorrow. Today I’m truly overwhelmed with work.'
And he actually came the next day. He sat on my sofa, still wearing his flour-dusted clothes. We talked for about half an hour. I paid him for a one-year subscription and also provided some financial support. Over time, we became friends, and through him, I met others who followed the path of independence and freedom and were in contact with Mr. Banisadr. I invited them to Stockholm, and our circle grew day by day. We began organizing lectures and Q&A sessions.
I managed to increase the number of subscribers from one to ten. However, since my friend wasn't very organized and sometimes delivered the issues late, I wrote a letter to the distribution manager myself, asking for ten copies to be mailed directly to me. They agreed. From then on, the magazine arrived on time, and I regularly sent it out to friends. I felt the path of my life was finally taking shape, and my bond with Iran and its people grew stronger. At night, I would eagerly sit down to reply to the letters arriving from home.
Then, a letter arrived from my sister, Simin. Inside was a note from my niece/nephew, who was about eight years old at the time. At the top of the note, they had drawn a large star and written next to it: **'Uncle’s Star.'**

A Star in the Sky of Exile

Shadi’s letter moved me beyond words. This little angel had found my star in the vast sky and, with her innocent gaze, gave me hope: *You are not alone in this world; you, too, have a star.*

A strange feeling washed over me. The lump that had been stuck in my throat for years—from all the hardships and betrayals of life—suddenly burst. No matter how hard I tried to write back, tears wouldn't let me. I don’t know if it was just because of that letter, or the accumulated weight of all those years in exile and the wounds I carried.

What is the secret, I wonder? We walk through life with many people, even living with them for years, yet sometimes a bond forms with a six or seven-year-old child that no one else can ever replace.

Back in Iran, I had that same special connection with Shadi. Even though I didn’t look like a particularly humorous person and had a mustache, she loved me. Sometimes I would even scold her, but I could see in her eyes that her love for me never wavered.

On Fridays, I would go to my eldest sister’s house for lunch. Shadi would always greet me with such excitement. One day, her mother said: "Uncle, Shadi hasn't eaten her lunch today."

I picked up one of her dolls, dragged it to the living room, closed the door, and sat behind it, pretending to scold the doll: "Why didn't you eat? Don't you know how much I love you? If you get sick, I'll be so sad..."

Hearing this, Shadi immediately asked her mother for food and said: "Tell Uncle I was just waiting to eat with him!" When I came out, my sister told me: "Shadi wasn't eating because she was waiting for you." I kissed her and said: "But children should eat earlier than adults."
On Fridays, she was the only one truly waiting for me. Once, I couldn't make it. The following week, my sister told me: "Last week, Shadi ate her food early, washed her face, stood by the door, and then said sadly: 'Uncle Mansour isn't coming... it's the *other* uncle who is coming.'
Now, after years of separation, Shadi had reconnected me to the past with a simple yet deeply emotional drawing. Her letter was the very hope of life. Among all the letters arriving from Iran, none shook my heart quite like hers. With others, you knew what they wanted from the very first line. But Shadi... she was pure, effortless, and expecting nothing—just full of affection.
Sometime later, a letter arrived from my eldest sister. Interestingly, no two pages were alike; each had been torn from the notebook of one of her students. She wrote with that same sense of frugality and hardship. She mentioned that the financial situation of Torab—the brother who had taken over the shop—was not good.
I sent some money to my sister and wrote: 'Give this to Torab in a way that he doesn't know it's from me; if he finds out, he won't accept it.' Later, in a phone call, she said, 'Torab wants to borrow 50,000 Tomans.' I replied, 'Give it to him, but on the condition that he pays his mother an amount equal to the bank interest on this sum every month.' Torab agreed, but not only did he never help our mother, he pocketed the entire sum. He even told his friends, 'I sent my brother abroad and I send him money every month!' One of the neighbors eventually found my address and wrote to complain about why I had left the shop to Torab.
Yet, I continued sending money to my sister to lend to the family. I could have bought a house for myself with that money, but I was 'buying' affection. I was deceiving myself, imagining that if I ever returned to Iran, they would help me too. It was a raw fantasy that I tried to pass off as reality.

My days were filled with work, and my nights with political activism and helping others. One day, I took a trash bag to the large container in the garage. Suddenly, my eyes caught 32 large vacuum cleaners that the hotel next to our company had thrown away. In Sweden, companies often discard equipment prematurely to avoid taxes and buy new ones—a clever ruse on the surface, but in reality, a way to bypass the tax system that ultimately hurts the wage-earners.

I pulled the vacuum cleaners out and put them in the company warehouse. Every day, I took two of them home by train, cleaned and repaired them, and gave them to friends and needy refugees. Many couldn't afford such appliances. I felt that if I couldn't change the world, I could at least fix what others had cast aside.

Two Iranian refugees who worked as cleaners in the morning and at our company at night later started their own cleaning business; I gave them vacuum cleaners too. I even found my first washing machine there. With the help of the company driver, I hauled it home, repaired it, and used it for years. I bought my clothes from second-hand shops. I was saving my money for others, not for myself.

The letters kept coming, mostly filled with requests. One wrote, 'You’re probably having a great time there with foreign girls!' while another simply demanded, 'Send me whatever you have!'

One day, my landlord, Amir, told me that his girlfriend’s sister was beautiful and kind, suggesting I should date her. We went on a picnic together. She was vibrant and lovely, and she told me she liked me. She even spoke about her past boyfriends.

But I... I couldn't convince myself. I told Amir, 'I can't play with someone’s feelings, nor can I let anyone play with mine.'

He laughed and said, 'Man, this is Europe! People live together if they like each other, and if they get bored, they split up!'

I replied, 'I don’t want to reform the world, but I can live the way I believe is right.' I then asked him, 'How many girlfriends have you had?'

He said with pride, 'I’ve lost count!'

'Would you want to marry someone who has also lost count of her boyfriends?' I asked.
'Never,' he replied.
'Why?' I pressed. He was stumped. Then he asked, 'How would you even know if the girl you want to marry hasn't slept with anyone?'
I said, '**By the fact that I don't do such things myself.**'
He said mockingly, 'Man, this is Europe, not a church or a mosque!' From then on, my friends started calling me 'The Priest.'
A month or two later, he called me late one night. He was upset with his girlfriend, Maria; he said his heart was heavy and he needed to talk. I was exhausted, but I agreed. I brewed some tea, and when he arrived, he looked pale and agitated. He said, 'Forgive me for intruding. Honestly, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I had no one better than you to talk to.'
As we drank tea, he told me he loved Maria deeply, but she had decided to move to Germany to work as a nanny for a family because the pay was good. They had fought about it. I told him, 'If I were you, I'd tell her: I love you very much and being away from you is hard for me, but if you feel you must go, then go. However, if she actually left, I wouldn't count on her as a future wife anymore.'
He said sadly, 'It's so hard to tell her to go...' I replied, 'Try it; you have nothing to lose. First, apologize for the argument, then tell her you won't stand in her way.'
He left. The next day he called and said, 'I told her that being apart would be difficult, but if she wanted to go, she should. She replied: No, I won't go. After thinking it over, I realized I can't live without you.' They later married and had a daughter.
Once, he asked me to help his brother, who was struggling with addiction. Based on my past experiences, I agreed to meet him. I spoke with him for an hour; he seemed deeply moved and said, 'I'm so glad I met you.' At the end, he pulled a cigarette from his pocket, mixed the tobacco with hashish, and tried to light it in the room. I stopped him: 'If you smoke that in my house, this is the last time we see each other. But if you smoke it outside, we can meet again.'

He lit his cigarette and asked me to join him. I just smiled, remembering the day my own brother had asked me to smoke opium with him. I said nothing and simply waited. He finished his cigarette and left. That was the first and last time I allowed him into my home.
I saw him a few more times in different places. He would approach me, but each time I told him: 'You have no intention of quitting your addiction, and as long as that’s the case, no one can help you.' I kept my distance. However, I maintained a distant connection with his brother, my old friend. Unfortunately, his life didn't turn out well either. His wife fell ill and passed away shortly after, leaving him alone with their young daughter. Sometime later, he himself fell ill with cancer. One day, overwhelmed by the pain, he threw himself from the balcony of his daughter’s foster father’s house, ending his own life.
One day, while on the train to work, I saw a familiar face. I looked closely; it was the brother of one of my high school classmates. I approached him, and he recognized me too. We greeted each other. I asked, 'What are you doing here? When did you arrive?' He replied, 'I was living in Germany. Because my residency process was taking too long, I came to Sweden. My family is here; they said it's easier to get residency here.' I gave him my number and said, 'Call me whenever you need help.' He was happy and got off at the next station.
A few moments later, ticket inspectors entered the train. One of them took my ticket and said, 'There's a problem with your ticket.' I showed him the purchase receipt and said, 'This is the receipt.' But he wouldn't give my ticket back. He said I had to go to their office. I told him, 'Please give me a receipt showing you have my ticket; otherwise, another officer might fine me at the next station.' He refused. I asked, 'How do I even know you're actually an official?' He showed me his ID. I grabbed it and said, 'I’m not giving this back until you return my ticket.'
The train stopped. All three inspectors lunged at me. They dragged me out of the train. I managed to break free, ran up the escalator, and asked the ticket booth attendant to call the police. Fortunately, the staff member was Iranian and agreed to help.

The police arrived, but instead of listening to my side, they took the officers' part. They told me, 'Hand over the ID card.' I reluctantly gave it back and went to work.
I told the story to my Swedish colleague, Stefan. He was upset and immediately called them to protest: 'How can you seize a passenger’s ticket without providing a receipt?'
They apologized and said, 'We will return his ticket.' Stefan pressed further, 'How is he supposed to get to your office without a ticket?' They replied, 'He should buy a single-trip ticket, and we will reimburse him.' I thanked Stefan; if he hadn't made that call, they certainly wouldn't have treated me fairly. After work, I went to their office, retrieved my ticket, and was reimbursed for the new one.
They explained that a theft had occurred at the shop where I bought my ticket a few days later, and they were looking for stolen batches. I told them, 'That’s no excuse to harass innocent people. At least issue a receipt when you take a ticket.' They replied, 'That’s a good point. We’ll do that from now on.'
A few days later, Rahim—the brother of my high school classmate—called and asked to see me. I gave him my address. He arrived an hour or two later with a suitcase in hand. Before even setting his bag down, he started badmouthing his relatives: 'They open my mail, they take the snacks and items sent from Iran...' He asked, 'Let me stay with you just for a while until I find a place.' I agreed and even gave him a spare key.
Two or three days later, I felt ill at work. I took two hours off and returned home early. When I opened the door, I found Rahim with a girl from Latin America. They were lounging on the sofa in their underwear, and they had been drinking.
They hurriedly dressed when they saw me. We sat down and spoke for a bit. The girl asked me, 'Do you have a girlfriend?'
'No,' I replied.
'Why?' she asked.
'Because I intend to get married,' I said.
'Do you want to marry someone from Iran?'
'Yes,' I replied.

She asked Rahim the same question, and he also said 'Yes.' The girl stood up, said goodbye, and left. Right at the door, she told Rahim, 'Don't call me again.'
Rahim was upset and asked, 'Why did you say that?'
I replied, 'She asked, and I answered. I'm not afraid of anyone, so why should I lie? But why did *you* lie? She saw herself as your girlfriend; with your answer, you humiliated her. Worst of all, you brought a girl into my home without my permission. I only hope you didn't take her into my bedroom...'
I went into the bedroom and saw they had used my bed. I told him, 'So your problem with your relatives wasn't about them opening your mail; it was your womanizing. You couldn't do this there, so you came here. Please find somewhere else to live as soon as possible.' A few days later, he moved out.
Sometime passed. One day, I ran into one of his relatives. After greeting me, he asked, 'Any news of Rahim?'
'I haven't heard from him; isn't he with you?' I asked.
'No,' he replied. 'He didn't even show mercy to the wife of one of our relatives who was having trouble with her husband!'
I didn't see him again until one day in the city center, I suddenly spotted him. I turned my head away, but he approached and said, 'Why are you turning away? Did I do something to you or your family?'
I replied, 'You showed no mercy to the woman who gave you shelter.'
He said coolly, 'I didn't hurt *you*!'
I said, '**It makes no difference. Someone who betrays their own relative's wife is capable of betraying anyone.**
He said, 'That woman wanted to have affairs with foreigners. I went there to save her!'
I replied mockingly, 'Are you asking for a reward now? Have you become Superman?!'
Finally, he said, 'I'm just glad no harm came to you,' and he left.
A while later, I found the chance to answer three letters. The first was from a neighbor in Iran. He wrote: 'Every time I pass the shop you built with your own hands and see your

brother standing there, it pains me. Whenever I ask him about you, he puts his hand in his pocket with a self-righteous air and says: I sent my brother abroad; I even send him money every month.'
In response, I wrote: 'Everyone reaps what they sow. Do not trouble yourself. It is enough for me that you didn't believe those words. If anyone claims I owe them anything, please let me know, and I will pay them manifold.'
The second letter was from my sister, Rokhsareh. She wrote: 'My child's classmate said a relative sent him a shirt from abroad. Now my child expects me to get him foreign clothes too.'
I replied: 'I have fourteen nieces and nephews. I will only do such a thing when I can send something for every single one of them. Do not forget that I always gave gifts to all the children for Eidi and their weddings.'
Answering those two was simple. But the third letter... was from little Shadi. And replying to that was the hardest task of all.
She had sent me a drawing: with her tiny hands, she had drawn a star and written: **'Uncle’s Star.'**
Every time I looked at it, my heart trembled. Tears would flow uncontrollably. It reminded me of the world I had spent my whole life searching for. For years, I had complained to myself, and even to God: 'Why, in your seven heavens, is there not even a single star for me?' Sometimes I would whisper to Him: 'It seems even You do not see me...'
But now, a six or seven-year-old girl had found my star. Her drawing was a promise that from this day on, I, too, have a star.
Days went by, and my routine became opening Shadi’s letter, staring at her drawing, and entering a world I had never truly possessed. I was in one of the darkest moments of my life. Yet, that tiny star was slowly bringing the light back to my heart. It whispered: 'Humanity is not dead yet... there is still someone who can be a beacon of hope for you.'
I tried to reply to her letter many times, but I couldn't. My hand lacked the strength to write; it felt as though tears had taken the place of the pen. I changed the paper several times until finally, the pen slipped from my grip and my heart began to write:

Dear Shadi,
I am so, so happy that you managed to find my star. With the discovery of this star, the light of hope has been ignited in my heart. Now, I feel that I truly exist... because I am no longer alone. From this day on, just like everyone else, I have a star of my own. Thank you for helping me and for returning my lost star to me.
I mailed the letter. And for days, I waited... waiting for a response from Shadi. I wanted to be certain that this emotional thread—this thin yet living bond—was still intact.

Connecting with the Girl I Was Meant to Marry

"A letter arrived from my sister, Rokhsareh. This time, there was no mention of gifts for the children; instead, she proposed a marriage to 'settle' my life. She wrote: 'I've found a girl for you; her father is a factory owner, and she is a teacher.' Soon after, another letter came, suggesting yet another girl.
This made me reflect on marriage. However, an unfinished matter back in Iran weighed heavily on my conscience. I wrote back to Rokhsareh: 'Before I decide on marriage, I must settle things with the person I was once intended to marry. Only then will my conscience be at peace.'
I asked her to deliver a letter to that girl, but she refused. Left with no choice, I wrote to my friend Saeed, asking him to deliver it to Monireh—the girl I was supposed to have married. Saeed warned me at first but eventually agreed for my sake.
In the letter, I wrote: 'If you are still in a position to decide for your own future, I stand by my word. I will wait one month for your reply. If I hear nothing, or if your response indicates a withdrawal, I will move on with my life.'
Two weeks later, the answer arrived. She wrote that she was capable of making her own decisions and agreed to marry me. I wrote to my eldest sister, asking her to use the money I had entrusted to her to help Monireh get a

passport. I also asked my brother, Ramin, to perform the marriage proxy for us. After the ceremony, I told my sister: 'From this day on, she is my wife, and her living expenses are my responsibility.'
My marriage coincided with that of a friend who had met his wife in an Arab country. One day at his house, he asked, 'Have you bought clothes for your wife?'
'No,' I replied. 'I'll wait until she arrives so we can buy them together.'
He said in surprise, 'You should have bought her clothes before she arrived!'
'Did you buy them yourself?' I asked.
'Yes!' he said proudly. 'Come, let me show you.'
He took me to the storage room, showed me five or six sets of women's clothing, and said, 'I bought all of these for her.'
A few months after his wife arrived in Sweden, she told me during a moment of frustration with him, 'He is incredibly stingy.'
Surprised, I said, 'But I remember he bought clothes for you even before you arrived.'
With a bitter smile, she replied, 'No... those were my own clothes. I gave them to him in Dubai to bring here.'
She continued, 'Two days after I arrived, he told me I had to work in the bakery to pay off my debt.'
'Debt? Were you indebted to him?' I asked.
She said, 'He claims I owe him for his two trips to Dubai, my flight ticket, and even the expenses of our wedding. I have to work to compensate for all of that.'
Then she added, 'In Iran, I went to his mother's house for months; I cooked and sewed for them just so they could see if I was "worthy" of their son—while their son had previously been married to a Finnish woman and even had a child with her.'
I couldn’t believe a man could treat his wife this way. In all the time we were friends, I never saw him wear clean or neat clothes; there was always flour on him. He was educated, yet miserly. Once, during a gathering, we were raising money for a charitable cause. Everyone contributed. When it was his turn, he didn't even reach for his pocket. He told me, 'Pay two thousand kronor on my behalf. I'll pay you back later.' I reminded him several times, but each time

he said, 'I don't have it now... I'll give it later.' He never paid it back. He just wanted to show off in front of others using my money. Later, with his brother's cooperation, they sent people's money to America and declared bankruptcy in Sweden. He eventually moved to America himself.
Meanwhile, the day of my wife's arrival was drawing closer. Everything was ready: the marriage, the passport, the documents... only the visa and the journey remained.
The long-awaited day finally arrived. I went to the airport with that same friend, his wife, and a videographer friend. The plane landed. We were waiting...
The bride, dressed in black, entered the hall. I waved. As soon as her eyes met mine, she came forward. I gave her a flower and welcomed her. After the greetings, we first went to our friend’s house. She rested for a while, and then we went to our own home.
She was exactly as I remembered her in Iran; she hadn't changed at all. It was as if she had nothing to say. Perhaps her mother had instructed her: 'Whatever your husband says, just say yes. He is a Seyyed.' I wondered to myself: Could her heart be elsewhere? Did she marry under family pressure? Or is she just overwhelmed by this new environment?
One day I told her: 'Sometimes people marry out of necessity or family pressure while their heart belongs to someone else. If that is the case with you, speak honestly. I give you my word of honor that I will help you reach the one you love. I don't want you to be by my side while your heart is somewhere else.'
She replied, 'I swear to God, there is no one else in my life.'
I shared my concerns about her behavior with a doctor. He said, 'Sometimes it takes years for a spouse to adjust to new circumstances.' I thought, Maybe she suffered a lot in my absence... maybe she just needs time.
Some time passed... One day I noticed her back was hurting. I asked, 'Does your back ache?'
'No, no, it's nothing,' she insisted. But it clearly was. We went to a doctor together; he said the problem was with the arches of her feet. We had a mold taken and ordered orthopedic shoes. With those, her back pain gradually improved.

Later, I realized she was suffering from headaches. I asked, 'Does your head hurt?' Again, she denied it. I don't know why she tried to hide her pain from me. One day, she was groaning from the intensity of the pain. I said, 'Let’s go to the doctor.'
She said, 'No, it's nothing. I’ll be fine.' She thought it was a migraine because her mother had migraines.
I asked, 'How are you sure? Have you seen a doctor?'
'No,' she said. 'Don't worry yourself; I'll get better.'
Finally, at my insistence, we went to the doctor. After the examination, they said the problem was with her eyes. We consulted an ophthalmologist, she was given a prescription, and we had glasses made for her. After that, her headaches finally ended.
One day, I asked her: 'What are you planning for your future? Do you want to be a homemaker? Study? Or work?' I added: 'If you want to study, the conditions are right here. But if you have a child, studying might become difficult. Think about it and decide. If you want to continue, we need to bring your documents from Iran and follow up on the equivalency process.' She replied: 'I don't like to study. I want to be a homemaker.' I accepted.
But unlike young women who enter a husband’s house with big dreams, she seemed to have no dreams at all. She wasn't active, nor was she joyful. She was always in her shell. I tried to provide a warm and happy environment for her, hoping that with time, her spirits would change. But time passed, and I saw no change.
In parties and gatherings, she never defended herself; I had to be the one to do it. When we went clothes shopping, we would return empty-handed. She would just look, without any desire to choose. Sometimes I would buy several outfits and bring them home, hoping she might like one. But she would always say: 'You choose.'
When I arrived home exhausted from work, I would approach her with open arms; but she never welcomed me with open arms in return. I didn't know what made her happy. She wasn't into makeup. For a long time, I was the one who styled her hair for her. I thought she wasn't happy with being a woman. The feelings I usually saw in women

were absent in her. I started to feel bad; sometimes I felt like an intruder.
I tried different methods many times. I distanced myself from her for a while, thinking she might take the initiative; but it was useless. It seemed to make no difference to her. In the end, I had to be the one to step forward again. I told myself: 'Maybe if she has a child, her feelings will change.
Time passed, and she became pregnant. I was happy, hoping that the maternal instinct would awaken in her and perhaps bring her emotions to life. But that hope, too, proved fruitfulness. Our first child was born. I expected a zest for life to ignite within her, but that maternal fervor I had seen in other women was missing.
The only thing that seemed to hold special importance for her was her headscarf (hijab). It was as if her entire faith would crumble if it fell from her head. One day I said to her: 'I heard you used to teach Quran in Iran. Can you show me the verse regarding the hijab and headscarf?'
She replied, 'No, I didn't teach Quran. I don't know which verse that is.'
I handed her the Quran and said, 'Read it whenever you have a chance and find it. If you can't find it, please consider removing your headscarf. Because the Iranian regime has committed such crimes and corruption in the name of religion that many people, especially Iranians abroad, have become repelled by faith. When they see you with a headscarf, they might think you support the regime. This will make it hard for you to find friends and you'll end up alone. The choice is yours.'
Sometime later, without even reading the Quran, she took off her headscarf. After that, the behavior of our friends toward her improved. When Ramadan arrived, she said, 'I want to fast. I feel like my prayers and fasting won't be accepted without the headscarf.'
I replied, 'That’s perfectly fine. The choice is yours.'
And by her own will, she put the headscarf back on.
When she had removed it, no one asked her, 'Did your husband tell you to take it off?' But when she put it back on, several people asked, 'Did your husband tell you to wear it?'
She remained silent. She wouldn't say it was her own decision. That silence bothered me. I told her several times:

'Why don't you tell them it was your own choice? When you say nothing, it's as if you've put it back on because of me.
Later, I discovered that her reason for wearing the headscarf again was neither fasting nor faith; it was because her brother had seen a photo of her without it and told her: 'You went abroad and became corrupted!' Out of fear of her brother's verbal abuse, she put the scarf back on —despite our agreement to make our own life decisions. Now, her brother was deciding for her.
I tried repeatedly to make her understand that she was my wife, not my slave. But her actions showed how she had been raised and how deeply she was influenced by her background.
One day, I returned from work. My shift ended at four, and I was usually home by four-thirty. As always, tea was ready in the kitchen. She came from the living room to greet me. I changed my clothes, went to the kitchen, and asked cheerfully: 'Would you like some tea?'
She stood up, came to the kitchen, and said: 'You go sit down; I'll bring it.'
I said: 'Who says it always has to be you? I'm already in the kitchen asking if you want tea; you should just say: Yes, please bring some for me too. Am I a guest in this house that you're being so formal?'
She replied: 'But you're tired, you just came from outside...'
I talked to her at length. I told her that men and women are equal. Affection must be mutual. I told her: 'I didn't choose you to be my cook. You became my wife because I wanted a companion, a life partner. I find more joy in cooperation and equality than in hollow formalities.'
That same day, I told her: 'From now on, we'll go for walks every Saturday. We'll talk on the way. Whatever is on your mind, whatever you disliked about my behavior, say it without fear or hesitation. I'll do the same. This way, small issues won't pile up until they become unsolvable.'
We went for several walks. I asked her to tell me if she had seen anything unpleasant during the week. But she always remained silent. I didn't know if she truly saw nothing or if she was simply too afraid to speak.
I would start by pointing out the flaws I saw in her, hoping she might find the courage to do the same to me. But still,

there was only silence. Perhaps she thought the fault was always mine. Or perhaps she believed that a woman simply cannot criticize a man—that men and women are not equals.

One day, I bought her a fur coat, a very expensive one. I wrapped the gift joyfully, and just like in the movies, I stood behind the door and rang the bell. I expected her to open the door and embrace me with joy. She opened the door; I gave her the gift. She said: 'Why did you go through the trouble?' Instead of coming forward, she stepped back. I said: 'Where are you going? Come and open it.' She replied: 'Come in first; I'll open it later.'

I insisted she open it right then. Reluctantly, she came, opened the package, and saw the coat. She put it on and said: 'Thank you.' Then, in silence, she took it off, laid it on the floor, and headed toward the kitchen. She said: 'Go sit down; I'll bring you some tea.' I picked the coat up from the floor and hung it in the closet.

Some time later, I bought her a gold watch. I had the same expectation this time, but she said: 'Why did you buy a gold watch? I don't like gold.' I was astonished. I said: 'You may not like gold, but you should at least recognize the value of the gift.' Nothing seemed to make her happy.

I thought to myself that perhaps she was homesick. I said to her: 'Do you want me to buy you a ticket to go to Iran? How long of a trip do you want?' She didn't answer. I asked: 'Is two months enough?' She said: 'Okay.'

When she was about to leave, I asked: 'Do you want me to give you money to buy gold for yourself?' She asked: 'What would I do with it?' I said: 'It's good to have gold. If something ever happens, you can sell it and solve your problem.' She said: 'No, I don't want any,' and she left.

Later, I found out she had told her mother or sister about this conversation. They had told her: 'What a mistake! He's right; if your husband dies, you can live off those jewels for a while.'

A few days later, while we were talking on the phone, she said: 'If you can, send money so I can buy gold.'

I said, 'No.'

'But you said so yourself!' she replied.

I told her: 'That's true, I did. But when you ignored my

words, why did you change your mind just because others said so?'
The next time she went to Iran, I made the offer again, and she accepted. She bought gold, but not according to her own taste—it was chosen by others.
One day I told her: 'Raising one child is difficult because they become too dependent on the mother. But if there are two, they play together, they are less demanding, and you'll have more time. I think two children are enough for us; one is a constant struggle.' She agreed.
Our second child was also a girl. I was happy, but she was upset. She believed that a woman who doesn't bear a son for her husband isn't a 'good wife.' Many times, in her sleep or while semi-conscious, she would say: 'I'm not a good wife. Divorce me... I brought another girl into the world.'
But I was joyful. I knew there was no difference between a boy and a girl; that is just a decayed belief left over from the feudal era. Back then, a son meant a pair of working hands. But now, I am not a master, and you are not a peasant. I only prayed for our child to be healthy. When we returned from the hospital, I got to work and built a beautiful bed for her.

. We spent most of our holidays socializing with a group of friends. My employer was extremely satisfied with me. Since I had joined his workshop, even though the two previous carpenters—one who retired and the other who moved to America—were no longer there, I had managed to fill the shoes of both on my own. I repaired all the furniture in need of fixing by myself, and whenever necessary, I would go to the upper floors to help out.
One of my friends said: 'You’re making good money now, but how long do you plan to work "under the table" (off the books)? Your boss is happy with you; tell him to hire you officially.'
I told my employer: 'I want to start working "white" (legally) from now on.'
He replied: 'Alright, I agree.

The Employer’s Betrayal and the Start of the Conflict

"I said, 'I want to inform the Social Services (Social) that I am working.'
He replied, 'Why would you do that to yourself? You can keep getting help from the Social while working for me.'
I insisted, 'I either get officially hired, or I’ll leave to study.'
'Fine, it’s a deal,' he said.
'What does "deal" mean exactly?' I asked.
'Nothing, just go tell the Social that you are working.'
I then asked, 'What will my salary be if I work legally (white)?'
He said, 'I’ll pay you the same amount I was giving you under the table (black).'
I requested, 'Please put it in writing that I have been hired.'
He snapped, 'Don’t you trust my word? My word is my bond. Don't worry about it.'
I went and informed the Social Services that I was now employed and no longer needed their assistance. I felt a

great weight lifted off my shoulders because I never thought highly of those who chose not to work and lived off the state. I opened a bank account and gave the details to the company accountant so my salary could be deposited directly. I waited for the month to end to receive my first official paycheck.

At the end of the month, my employer called me and said, 'Here, take your salary.' He handed me the same cash he used to give me, but now calling it 'white' pay.

I asked, 'Why are you paying me in cash?'

He replied, 'Does it make a difference? Take it and deposit it yourself.'

I said, 'If it makes no difference, you should deposit it for me.'

He brushed it off, saying, 'Just take it this month; we'll fix it next month.' I reluctantly accepted.

The next month came. He called me again: 'Come get your pay.'

I said, 'We agreed you would deposit it into my account.'

He said, 'I can't deposit all of it. I'll give you half in cash and deposit the other half.'

I told myself I would wait one more month to see how this would play out.

I discussed the matter with an acquaintance, who said: 'Your employer hasn't made you official yet. Even the money he deposits into your account—he could claim it's just a loan he's paying back. Without a contract, you are still working "black".'

The next day, I said to my employer: 'Please give me an employment contract '

'What do you need that for?' he asked.

'I want to join the union,' I replied.

'I've already signed you up,' he lied.

'I want to get insured,' I said.

'I've insured you,' he claimed. 'If anything happens, they'll pay you two million.'

'That's great,' I said. 'Please give me the address or the policy number.'

He snapped, 'What's wrong with you? Why are you hounding me? Get back to work.'

I realized that the profit I’d generated for him was so high that making me official had become a heavy financial burden for him. I called one of the unions, told them I worked at a certain shop, and said I wanted to join. They said, 'First, we need to come and inspect your workplace.'
Two or three days later, while I was working in the basement, Mr. Mohsen stepped out of the elevator. He rushed toward me in a rage and shouted, 'What on earth have you done?'
'What do you mean?' I asked.
'Someone from the union called; they want to come here!'
'Why are you upset?' I replied. 'I didn't do anything wrong. I asked you for the details, and you didn't give them to me. I decided not to bother you and handle it myself.'
He sneered, 'No, I'm not upset. They can't do anything anyway. Whenever they show up, I'll just send them away with a Persian rug as a gift!'
'So, am I not hired?' I asked.
'Of course you are,' he insisted.
'Then if I am,' I said, 'please deposit my full salary, including all overtime, into my bank account.'
Until then, he thought I was only focused on my work because I was always helping out and didn't realize he was cheating me.
He said: 'Overtime? What overtime?'
I replied: 'Legal work (white) means 40 hours a week. Ever since we agreed I’d work legally, Saturdays count as overtime, and you haven't paid me for them yet.'
First he laughed, then he said: 'I’m not paying.'
I said: 'You will.'
He became furious, picked up a chair, and threatened: 'I’ll smash this over your head!'
I stepped forward and said: 'Do it! I won’t bow to force. You gave me your word. I counted on it. If you hadn't promised, would I have been crazy enough to pull myself out of Social Services?'
He asked: 'What difference does it make to you whether you're officially hired or not?'
I replied: 'The difference is that if I ever become unemployed, the Employment Agency will pay my salary for a while.'

He said: 'Let’s reach an agreement.'
'What kind of agreement?' I asked.
He proposed: 'You write a letter saying you resigned of your own accord, and I’ll write a document stating that you were indeed employed.'
I said: 'Now that’s a fair point.'
He added: 'Write the paper and bring it the day after tomorrow.'
I agreed.
My heart was heavy. I kept thinking: 'If I don't get help from the Social, am not a union member, and don't speak the language well, what will happen to my family if I lose my job?' I asked myself: 'Why does he want me to write that I resigned voluntarily? If I truly wasn't "employed" in the eyes of the law, what is he so afraid of?' I concluded that he was terrified someone might eventually come and ask the staff if I had worked there, and he wanted a document to protect himself.
The next day, I wrote the letter he had requested and took it to work with me. During lunch, I went to the dining area. As I was eating, Mr. Mohsen arrived. With his usual audacity, he picked up a spoon and took several bites of my food.
Then he asked, 'Did you write the letter?'
'Yes, I did,' I replied.
'Let me see it,' he said.
I countered, 'First, you give me the employment contract, then I’ll give you this.'
'Don't you trust me?' he asked.
I looked at him and said, 'Do you think I should? I don’t.'
Then I added, 'To be honest, I no longer care whether you give me the contract or not, because I’m going to work somewhere else.'
'Where?' he asked.
'You'll find out later,' I said.
'I’ll pay you more,' he offered. 'Stay here and work "black" (off the books).'
'No,' I replied firmly.
'I need to know when you're leaving so I can find a carpenter,' he said.
I told him, 'Not just a carpenter; you’re going to need three

people to replace me.'
'So, are you leaving at the start of the month?' he asked.
'It’s not certain yet,' I said.
He went into his office without handing over the contract. I knew he usually left the shop for an hour or two in the afternoon before returning. I waited for him to leave. Once he was gone, I picked up a trash bag and, as a distraction, headed toward the accounting department first.
The accountant was Mr. Mohsen’s girlfriend. I told her, 'I’m not busy, I want to collect the trash.' She was pleased and pointed out the bin. I emptied it, then headed to the coffee shop and gathered their trash as well. Finally, I entered Mr. Mohsen’s private office. I suspected he might have crumpled the contract and tossed it into his bin. I emptied his trash too, passing the accountant with a smile.
I took the elevator to the basement and left the door open so no one else could use it. I dumped all the trash onto my workbench. The very first paper I saw was the contract Mr. Mohsen had written himself and promised to give me. I carefully flattened it and put it in a folder. I was about to throw the rest away, but I thought, 'Maybe there are other documents here that might be useful one day.'
I started searching. Among the papers, I found a transaction record: five hundred thousand kronor in 'black money' for the shop's lease, registered in his partner’s name. I took the documents and discarded the rest of the trash. This was the first and last time I ever touched garbage.
An hour later, I was counting the minutes until I could take the documents home safely. I was terrified Mr. Mohsen would return and notice his bin was empty, or that coworkers would snitch on me. I was so anxious I couldn't work. I got dressed, went to the accountant, and said, 'I don’t feel well; I need to leave early.'
She said, 'You were fine a moment ago! Did the trash make you sick?'
I replied, 'No, I think it was something I ate for lunch.'
'Alright,' she said, 'I’ll tell Mohsen.
I left the company and first went to a photo shop to make several copies of the contract. Then I went to the Union and spoke with the representative. I said, 'I called before; you

were supposed to visit my workplace, but you never showed up.'
He replied, 'We did go, but your employer claimed no such person worked there.'
I showed him the contract. He accepted it and backdated my membership by three months, though I had to pay the back-dated fees. I told him, 'He pays my salary in cash, not through the bank.'
The representative said, 'Actually, that’s in your favor. He won’t be able to prove he ever paid you.' He handed me a handbook and said, 'The labor laws are in here; from now on, work according to this.' He explained that I needed to work for another three months to be eligible for unemployment benefits. So, I put my head down and kept working.
He continued to exploit me, even demanding four hours of illegal overtime every Saturday. His lifestyle, as some would say, was 'lavish.' He had a wife and several mistresses. Yet, despite all of this, he was always 'hungry' for more. There was an old Iranian man in the shop who repaired carpets; Mr. Mohsen cheated him too, undercounting his hours. He stole from everyone to spend on his mistresses.
Later, I discovered that both he and his son were involved with that old man’s daughter at the same time! When I told his son, 'It’s not right for a father and son to be involved with the same woman,' he replied with a laugh: 'It's not like we're doing it together! We just eat from the same plate!' Years later, I heard the son became an addict and died on the streets.
One day, Mr. Mohsen mentioned he had bought an apartment in central Stockholm and asked me to go with his driver to assess what it needed for decoration. When we arrived, a woman in her mid-twenties walked in, acting as if she owned the place. Without even a greeting, she snapped, 'What is all this? What are you doing?'
I asked, 'Whom do I have the honor of speaking with?' She replied, 'Take all of this away. I’ll come to the shop myself to pick out my furniture. The decor must be according to my taste.' I told her, 'I don’t know you. My employer is the owner of this house, and I work according to his

instructions.' She looked annoyed and said, 'We'll see about that!'
The next day, she came to the shop and picked out only the most expensive items. It didn't matter to Mr. Mohsen; he wasn't paying out of his own pocket—it all belonged to the company. In his own home, too, every carpet, sofa, and painting came from the shop. He would frequently swap the decor, bringing old items back to the shop to sell and taking new ones home. Even half of the cleaning and sanitary supplies bought for the store were diverted to his house by the driver.
Around that time, the accountant's relationship with Mr. Mohsen soured because she discovered he had a new mistress: the same young woman for whom he had rented the central apartment. Later, I found out that the girl got her revenge—one day, she sold everything in the apartment and fled Sweden.
Later, Mr. Mohsen told me, 'I've taken a large three-story shop on a main street in Stockholm. The ceiling is ruined. Go inspect it and give me your assessment.' It was a massive building. He had told the landlord the ceilings were completely rotten and needed full replacement, and that an elevator was necessary for wheelchair accessibility.
He leased the property on the condition of six months' free rent, with the costs for the ceiling repairs and elevator installation to be deducted from future rent. After my inspection, I told him: 'There's no need to replace all the ceilings; we can just renew the top floor and use the salvageable parts to repair the lower floors. The rest just needs paint.' We completed the repairs in two weeks.
He moved a vast amount of furniture and rugs from the old shop to stage the new one. Then, he applied for loans from several banks simultaneously. The bank representatives were impressed by the massive, fully-stocked showroom. Of course, under-the-table bribes were paid to ensure their 'cooperation.' One of them secured a massive loan for him, and the scheme was repeated with other banks.
With that money, Mr. Mohsen went to England and made a large purchase. Soon, the new shop was operational. After the six months of free rent and deducting repair costs, he valued the old, leftover inventory at exorbitant prices for

the new shop while transferring high-quality goods from the new shop to his old one at a pittance. Then, he declared bankruptcy for the new shop.
One day, I asked him: 'How does no one hold you accountable?'
He coolly replied: 'I have a great lawyer. I pay him half a million kronor a year, and he cleans up one or two of these bankruptcies for me annually.'
It was infuriating that a man capable of such massive fraud begrudged me a meager salary—less than the cost of one of his nights out. When my six-month union membership was finalized, I told him: 'I'm no longer working on Saturdays.'
'I'll deduct it from your pay,' he threatened.
'Do whatever you want,' I replied.
A few days later, he called me: 'Come to my office; I need to talk to you.' I went in and saw someone else sitting there. His back was to me, but from the look on Mr. Mohsen's face, I could tell he had a 'surprise' waiting for me.
When I walked in, I saw it was Rahim—the brother of my friend, the one I had once given shelter to. He was taken aback when he saw me; he stood up and greeted me with a look of shame.
Mr. Mohsen said mischievously, 'He wants to work here. What do you think?'
I replied, 'It couldn't be better. If you don't need anything else, I'll get back to work.'
I hadn't gone far when Rahim called out to me. I stopped. He came forward and said, 'I swear to God, I didn't know you worked here.'
'What do you mean you didn't know?' I asked. 'How did you find this place then?'
He said, 'There was an ad in the newspaper, so I called.'
I asked, 'Isn't Mansour here?'
'No,' he replied.
I said, 'It doesn't matter. I'm finishing up my time here anyway. It makes no difference to me who replaces me.' I said my goodbyes and left.
A few minutes later, Mr. Mohsen called me back to his office. I went in.
'Sit down,' he said.
'I don't sit during work hours,' I replied.

He laughed and said, 'I’m your boss, and I’m telling you to sit.'
I sat down.
'Did you know him?' he asked.
'Yes,' I said.
'What a backstabber!' he remarked.
'Why?' I asked.
He said, 'I asked him if he could do your job. He told me: "His work is nothing compared to mine! He doesn't know the first thing about carpentry!
He said, 'Because he said that, I didn't hire him.'
I replied, 'You made a mistake. Actually, he’s perfect for the way you run things. But it’s none of my business who replaces me. Once you settle my account, we can talk about what happens next.'
'What account?' he asked.
I said, 'For the period you promised to hire me officially, you paid me under the table, failed to insure me, and didn't pay for my overtime or holiday pay.'
He said mockingly, 'And how much do I supposedly owe you?'
I answered firmly, 'About forty thousand kronor.'
He laughed and said, 'I don't pay anyone out of intimidation.'
I looked him in the eye and said, 'My neck is much thinner than yours. If you dropped a million dollars at my feet, I wouldn't touch it. But I will pull what is rightfully mine out of your throat—not through bullying, but through the law.'
'What law?' he asked.
I replied, 'The same law under which I have been employed.'
'You aren't even employed!' he scoffed.
I said, 'You’re mistaken. I have been your official employee for a long time.'
He didn't believe me.
A few days later, I called the Union and said, 'Inform the company that from this month on, they must deduct my membership fee from my salary and transfer it directly to the Union's account.'
The next day, I went to work. On my way, I passed the accounting department. Mr. Mohsen’s girlfriend greeted me

and asked: 'How did you manage to join the union? When were you even hired?'
I replied: 'A long time ago. Didn't Mr. Mohsen tell you? Why do you ask?'
She said: 'Your union called and said the company must pay your membership fees starting this month.'
I smiled and said: 'Excellent!'
I went to the workshop and started working. Not even thirty minutes had passed when the elevator moved and stopped. Mr. Mohsen stepped out, pale and fuming with rage. He rushed toward me and barked: 'What kind of game are you playing?'
I looked at him and said: 'There is no game. You are the one who has been playing with my life until now. But as of today, the game is over. Everything from here on is serious.'
He was so livid he had lost all color in his face. He couldn't believe I was standing up to him, talking about the 'end of the game.' He saw himself as a giant, a tough guy whom no one dared to oppose. He still thought I was bluffing.
With gritted teeth, he said: 'You think you're clever? You forged my signature! Do you have any idea what kind of crime that is?'
I replied: 'Don’t worry about my "crime." The signature isn't a forgery—it’s the original.'
He snapped: 'How? I never signed any contract with you!'
I said: 'Have you forgotten? The day I asked to write a contract, you said your word was your bond! When I said I wanted to join the union, you claimed you had already signed me up. When I said I wanted insurance, you said you had insured me for two million in damages!
I said: 'You were right; you did everything yourself, so why are you upset now? If you think the signature is forged, go ahead and file a complaint. I’m not looking for trouble; I’m just looking for what’s mine. I won't let anyone take advantage of me.'
I continued: 'I helped you all this time, but you mistook my humanity for stupidity. For every bit of help I gave, you matched it with betrayal. You said a man’s word is his bond, but you proved your word has no value.'
He shouted in a rage: 'Pack your things and get out of my sight!'

I replied: 'I came here to work. But since you don't want me to, I'll leave. Just make sure you pay for today's work.'
He growled: 'Get lost, or whatever happens next will be your own fault.'
I said my goodbyes and returned home. My wife asked: 'Why are you back so early?'
'It's nothing,' I said, and sat down. While I was having tea, I noticed some biscuits on the table. I took one and realized it was stale. I checked the packaging and saw it was six months past its expiration date.
I asked: 'Did you give these to the children too?'
'Yes,' she said.
'Where did you buy them?'
'From the supermarket next to the garage,' she replied.
'Did you pick them from the shelf or the clearance section?'
'From the shelf,' she said.
I headed straight to Agha Safar's supermarket. I showed him the biscuits and said: 'Agha Safar, these are for children, and they are six months past their date. Don't risk our children's lives for the sake of a few kronors in profit.'
« He said: 'It's not my fault. The workers aren't doing their job properly. I've told them many times to clear out the expired items, but they don't listen.' He went and brought a fresh pack of biscuits.
I told him: 'I didn't come here for a new pack. Please remove the expired goods from the shelves, set them aside, and mark them as "Expired".'
He sighed: 'I'm working all by myself and...'
I offered: 'If you'd like, I can help you with that.' He was delighted.
The next day, I went to the carpet shop owner who had originally introduced me to Mr. Mohsen and told him the whole story. I said: 'Out of respect for you, I'll wait one week. If Mr. Mohsen pays what he owes me, that's that. If not, I will file a formal complaint.' I showed him the employment document written in Mr. Mohsen's own hand and mentioned I had plenty of evidence but preferred not to use it yet. He thanked me for informing him before taking legal action.

From there, I returned to Agha Safar’s supermarket and began organizing the expired goods. I didn't want to stay idle at home.
The following day, my wife said: 'A gentleman named Saeedi called and said he needs to talk to you. He left his number.'
Mr. Saeedi owned a carpet shop and was an old acquaintance of Mr. Mohsen. I called him, and after a few minutes of conversation, he invited me to his shop. When I arrived, he welcomed me with open arms and began criticizing Mr. Mohsen—since he was also his competitor. He said: 'I told him many times to appreciate you. While you were working there, both he and his staff spoke highly of you. He’s a fool for not knowing the value of an asset like you.'
He then said: 'Let’s work together; I provide the capital, you provide the labor. We’ll be fifty-fifty partners.'
I replied: 'Mr. Saeedi, I thought you were a friend of Mr. Mohsen and wanted to reconcile us, not "marry" me off to yourself!'
He was a bit taken aback by my remark but quickly regained his composure and said softly: 'I only made that offer so you'd know you’re not alone and that I have your back. Now, I want to call Mr. Mohsen.'
He picked up the phone and told him: 'Mansour is with me. We’re coming over to talk for a few minutes.' Then he turned to me and said, 'Let’s go.' We went to see Mr. Mohsen. Saeedi, with his smooth-talking manner, said: 'Mansour is very upset with you. I told him you’re not the type to take what belongs to others. Sit down, talk it out, and settle this.'
I said: 'I’m not looking for a fight or resentment. I just want what is mine. Mr. Mohsen owes me this amount.'
Mr. Mohsen laughed again and said: 'For Mr. Saeedi’s sake, I’ll give you ten thousand kronor.'
I stood up, said my goodbyes, and walked out of the shop. I went back to the supermarket and continued organizing the shelves. My wife came and said: 'Saeedi called again; he wants you to go to his shop tomorrow.'
I went the next day. He treated me hospitably and said warmly: 'You are a gem. Mr. Mohsen didn't value you. Since

no agreement was reached, let’s start a new venture together. This time, from the ground up, solid and calculated.'
I said: 'I have no capital.'
He replied: 'I’ll provide the capital, you provide the skill. I’ll buy antiques, you’ll repair them, and we’ll sell them.' He was trying to win me over with grand promises.
I told him: 'Partnership is good, but I also want a fixed monthly salary.'
Surprised, he asked: 'You want both fifty percent and a salary?'
I replied: 'You should set a salary for yourself too, separate from the profit share.'
He agreed and said: 'Then I’ll have my lawyer draft the contract.'
I said goodbye and headed home.
The next day, I went back to Agha Safar’s shop and finished collecting the expired goods. As I was leaving, he said: 'If you have time, I need to pour my heart out to you.'
We sat down. He said: 'This shop isn't mine; it belongs to Mr. Khansari. I just work here, and everything I earn goes into his pocket.'
I asked: 'You mean you do all the work, but someone else takes the profit?'
'Yes,' he replied. 'The lease condition is that I can only buy stock from him. Not only does he take rent, but he also overcharges for the goods. My brother, who is the cashier, also steals from me.'
His voice broke. He added: 'My wife is also betraying me; she’s having an affair with the shop owner.'
He begged me not to leave him. I said: 'I’ll be starting my new job soon, but I’ll help you whenever I can.' The shop was located in a 2,000-square-meter garage. Agha Safar had turned part of it into a store, but the rest was filled with junk and infested with rats. I suggested: 'Let’s clear that area and turn it into a parking lot. Then, in the radio ads, write: Free Parking.'
That same day, Mr. Saeedi called and said: 'Come over, let’s talk.'
I went. He said: 'The contract will be ready tomorrow. I want to add an accountant to the team: Irene.'

'Who is Irene?' I asked.
He said: 'She’s my own accountant. She’ll handle both my company’s books and our new company’s.'
'What about her salary?' I asked.
He replied: 'Instead of a salary, we’ll give her four percent of the company’s profit.'
I said: 'That’s fine, sounds good.'
He concluded: 'So that leaves 48 percent for me, 48 percent for you, and 4 percent for Irene. Come on Monday to sign the contract.
I said, 'Alright.' From there, I walked to see Hossein, the carpet dealer who had first introduced me to Mr. Mohsen. One of his friends was also there. After the greetings, I said: 'I was with Saeedi; we’ve agreed to become partners.'
'How much capital did you put in?' he asked.
I replied, 'None. He provides the capital, I provide the labor. First, he said fifty-fifty, but then it became forty-eight each, with four percent for his accountant.'
Hossein looked at his friend, who then looked at me and said: 'What a backstabber that man is!'
'Why?' I asked.
He explained: 'That woman isn't just his accountant; she’s his mistress. With that share structure, they effectively hold 52 percent. They can do whatever they want—charge the company several times the actual price for goods and easily cheat you.'
Hossein added: 'Mr. Mohsen called me. He wants me to talk to you about returning to work.'
I said: 'He must settle his debt first.'
'It seems he’s agreed to compromise,' Hossein said. 'He asked you to come to his office tomorrow.'
I replied: 'I’d like you to come with me.' He agreed.
On the way home, I thought deeply. I concluded that a partnership with Saeedi would not end well. When I arrived, I called him and said: 'You have many professional complications, and I don't want to add to them. Thank you for the offer, but I won't be signing the contract.'
'Did you talk to someone? Are you unhappy with your share?' he asked.
'No,' I said. 'My heart just isn't in it.'

The next day, Hossein and I went to see Mr. Mohsen. After the greetings, I turned to Mr. Mohsen and asked: 'In the time I worked here, did you see any faults? Any slacking? Any damages?'
'No,' he replied. 'Both I and the staff have been satisfied with you.
I turned to Hossein-Agha and said: 'You were the one who introduced me, and I am glad I didn’t let you down. From now on, you no longer have any responsibility toward me. If Mr. Mohsen wants, I will stay until our accounts are settled; if not, I will leave.'
Mr. Mohsen replied: 'We are just beginning our work together as of today.'
Hossein-Agha left. Mr. Mohsen and I sat down and settled the accounts. He asked for a discount on the debt, and I accepted without complaint, formally resigning from the job with full satisfaction.
But that money didn't solve any of his problems. His life fell apart. His son’s drug abuse became so extreme that he died young. What a bitter fate.

Meeting Iran's First Elected President

"I remained committed to building a life defined by human dignity—on one hand, struggling against the anti-human and anti-religious regime in Iran to establish democracy; and on the other, addressing the struggles of my own life, my family, and my fellow compatriots in exile. I believed in being an active force for a just and non-discriminatory society, wherever I stood.
After some time of activism and increasing the subscribers of the publication I distributed, a friend involved in its printing invited me to attend a seminar of the 'Union of Islamic Students' (Majame-e-Islami). He wanted me to meet Mr. Banisadr and the union members to expand our cooperation.

I repeatedly told him that I did not wish to become an official member of any group. I wanted to remain free—to cooperate with any person or movement where I found truth. Once you become part of a collective, you gradually lose your freedom; instead of defending the truth, you become a defender of your party or group. Therefore, I preferred independence.
He replied, 'You don’t have to join. Just come, observe, and get acquainted. It’s simply a meeting.' Since I had always wanted to see Mr. Banisadr in person, I decided to attend one of the seminars just for the introduction.
The day arrived. Along with two friends—one a dental student in Stockholm and the other a facilities engineer from Gothenburg—we decided to meet at Paris airport and head to Mr. Banisadr’s residence.
However, before the trip, I had a disagreement with my friend from Gothenburg. I had often heard from others that Mr. Banisadr lived in one of France’s royal palaces in Versailles and that the French government paid him a presidential salary. They claimed he was very wealthy. But my friend wouldn't buy it. He insisted that Mr. Banisadr’s home was very cold, the heating was broken, and he even asked me to bring a sleeping bag. I was annoyed by his claims and asked, 'Does the French government not pay him a presidential salary?!' He maintained, 'Mr. Banisadr has never accepted any financial aid from the French government.
I asked, 'Then how does he manage his living expenses? He can't work, and he has no remaining source of income.'
His answer was always: 'No matter how much I explain, you won't believe it. It's better for you to come, see for yourself, and if you have questions, ask him directly.'
With great difficulty, I managed to get a French visa. My friend and I flew from Stockholm and met at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport. We took a taxi to Versailles to meet the man I had only ever seen once before, from a distance of fifty meters.
About forty minutes later, we arrived. We rang the bell, and a young man from Kermanshah opened the door with a wide smile, welcoming us warmly. We entered, and Mr. Banisadr

and his wife, Mrs. Azra, greeted us graciously. The other union members hadn't arrived yet, as we were early.
We went upstairs to Mr. Banisadr's office. In the middle of the room sat a large *Korsi* (a traditional Persian heated table). Some people sat around it, while others were on chairs. My friend began talking to him, but I was mesmerized, watching the man whom neither the presidency nor the position of Commander-in-Chief had managed to corrupt or lead astray.
Curiously, I looked for signs to compare what I had heard with the reality before me. Seeing a *Korsi* in the home of Iran's first president was both strange and fascinating. Sitting around it, the warmth of the room, the intimacy of the atmosphere... it was all so different from the image that had been constructed of him. I wondered if he led a double life—one for the public and another in private—but nothing was hidden. The environment was so comfortable that I gathered the courage to ask the questions weighing on my mind. He answered with calm and patience.
Throughout the week I spent there, I compared his behavior with his words, and his answers with the articles I read in the publication. His wife, Mrs. Azra, served us tea and sweets herself. It is a personal trait of mine not to trust mere words; I always pay attention to actions. Thus, I strove to know his true character. We talked for hours. Mr. Banisadr listened and responded with exemplary patience; he wouldn't rest until he felt we were convinced—a quality I realized I lacked in myself.
Dinner time arrived. We headed to the kitchen and enjoyed Mrs. Azra's cooking. Afterward, my friend and I went to the yard for a smoke. The yard was vast but overgrown with weeds and dried branches. It was then I realized there was no sign of the 'gardener' the French government was rumored to have provided for Mr. Banisadr.
We smoked several cigarettes in a row until Jamal called out, 'Hossein! Come up, tea is ready!' We returned to the room and continued the conversation. At midnight, we went to a large hall on the ground floor to sleep. My friends got into their sleeping bags, but I initially used mine only as a quilt. After a few hours, the piercing cold forced me to zip

myself inside. I thought to myself: 'If it’s this cold in summer, heaven help them in winter!'
In the morning, we washed our faces with cold water and went for breakfast. I saw Mrs. Azra preparing lunch herself; that confirmed the 'French-provided chef' was also a myth. My pride was stung. After breakfast, I asked Jamal for gardening tools. He had only a few basic ones and a small trimmer. I set aside my neat clothes and got to work. It took me two full days to tidy that huge yard—over two thousand square meters. Finally, it was usable.
Gradually, guests from other countries arrived. On Friday, the seminar began with an exchange of news. Friends from various places shared updates from Iran and their respective host countries. I sat in a corner, observing everyone’s behavior closely. Finally, three friends from Germany arrived. One of them smiled at me; I knew instantly he was the publication manager I had spoken with over the phone. He realized I was the newcomer. I stood up and greeted him warmly.
Gradually, all the friends arrived. He introduced me, saying: 'This is the person I told you about.' I introduced myself, and the friends welcomed me one by one. After the session, I bonded with those who felt closer to me in spirit and thought. On that very first day, my sense of loneliness vanished. I felt like I truly belonged to this circle.
I will never forget that day when Mrs. Azra signaled to one of the friends from the yard to tell me she needed me. When I turned toward the window, I saw her gesturing: 'Come to the yard.' I went and saw Mr. Banisadr sitting with one of his friends at a table for four. I asked, 'Did you need me for something?'
Mrs. Azra said, 'We have four ice creams but only three of us. I wanted you to join us.' I was overjoyed to be chosen as the fourth person. I stepped forward, said hello, and shook hands with Mr. Banisadr’s friend. He was a warm and sincere man. He said, 'Sit down, let’s see what kind of person you are.' It seemed he quickly realized I was a simple, straightforward person who didn't need much time to be understood.
He introduced himself. Mrs. Azra added, 'He was Iran’s first ambassador to Italy and the Vatican during Mr. Banisadr’s

presidency, and now he lives in Spain.' I felt wonderful having met such warm people in such a short time. According to the schedule, Mr. Banisadr was to give a speech for the union members on Friday evening, followed by a public lecture on Sunday. Many Iranians living in France, along with friends and other interested individuals who weren't official members, could attend that public session and ask their questions.

On Friday, the private lecture for members began. I noticed my friend, the dental student from Sweden, recording Mr. Banisadr's words. I asked him afterward, 'What will you do with this tape?' He replied, 'I'll take it and listen whenever I want.' 'Just for personal use?' I asked. 'Yes,' he said. There were no video cameras in sight.

The next day, the public session was held, and the Q&A began. It was then, through the nature of the questions, that I realized how extensively the regime had censored the truth. Most questions revolved around the lies the regime had fabricated and spread against Mr. Banisadr. Aside from that bi-weekly publication with a limited circulation, he had no means to break through the censorship. Many were not even aware the magazine existed.

That day, as I listened to the people's questions and his responses, many ambiguities were cleared. The lies I had heard melted away one by one. I felt proud of the vote I had once cast for him; I was glad I hadn't made a mistake.

The seminar ended, and friends returned to their respective cities and countries. My friend and I headed to the airport for our flight back to Sweden. As I moved further away from Versailles, a strange sorrow grew heavy in my heart. Throughout the journey back to Sweden, I couldn't stop comparing Banisadr to Dr. Mossadegh. I thought to myself: The Shah staged a coup against Dr. Mossadegh and imprisoned him in his home in Ahmadabad. Such censorship was enforced that people didn't even know where he was or how he lived. Yet, Mossadegh remained faithful to his covenant with the people until the end and never surrendered. But that very censorship caused his name to fade from memory for a time.

I felt history was repeating itself. Another coup against another elected representative of the people—this time, the

person I had voted for. I felt a sense of responsibility. Banisadr had stood against tyranny solely out of loyalty to our vote and his belief in democracy. Now he was in exile, without physical security, and the regime was seeking to assassinate him.
I vowed to myself that I would not let censorship succeed this time. I had to bring his voice to the people. My vote for him was not just a political choice; it was a moral covenant. Now, in these difficult times, it was my duty to stand by him.
The plane landed at Stockholm Airport. About an hour later, I reached home. It didn't take long for my wife to notice that this trip had affected me deeply. I constantly reproached myself for not having gone to visit him sooner. In a brief letter to Mr. Banisadr, I wrote:
'As long as you remain faithful to your covenant with the people, I, too, shall remain by your side.'
From then on, I strove to provide whatever help I could, hoping to compensate for past negligence. It wasn't just because he was the first elected president of the Iranian people, but because to me, he held the role of a spiritual father. Reading his writings gave me a reason to live. His lifestyle instilled a unique strength within me. Day by day, my motivation to struggle against tyranny grew, and the commitment to our covenant deepened within my soul.

Helping a Fellow Countryman and His Betrayal

"After a few days of rest, I went to Agha Safar’s shop. He welcomed me with such warmth, as if he were seeing his dearest relative. He acted as though life had been incredibly difficult for him during my absence and was eager to have me by his side again.
The next day, I began cleaning the garage. In a short time, I cleared a section so customers could park their cars while shopping. Two days later, the first radio advertisement for

'Free Parking' was aired. According to Agha Safar, this alone increased his daily sales by about two thousand kronor.
His respect for me grew. He listened to my ideas but was always worried I might start another job and leave him. One day, I told him I had an idea for the rest of the garage space. I suggested he tell the landlord that the remaining area was practically unusable and ask to lease it to us. My plan would boost his shop’s business, provide the landlord with more income, give the neighborhood a shopping center, and secure a permanent workplace for me.
He happily agreed but then went quiet and said, 'I don’t have any money.' I replied, 'I’ll provide the funds. You just talk to the landlord and get his approval. If he agrees, we’ll establish a new company, on the condition that each of us gives two percent of our income to Mr. Banisadr.' Agha Safar was so thrilled he said, 'I’ll give five percent!'
I was glad, thinking I had found a good partner. He sent his accountant, Ms. Margaret Sjölund (a Swedish lady), to the landlord. The owner, **Riksbyggen**, agreed to lease the section at a reasonable rate. The next day, I started drafting the plans. I finalized the design and gave it to the accountant to get approval from the landlord. We agreed the lease would start in four months to allow time for construction.
For the company registration, I went to the bank with Ms. Sjölund. By law, each partner had to deposit twenty-five thousand kronor into the company account. I paid my share, and since Agha Safar had no money, I paid his share as well, to be reimbursed later. Our company was registered under the name **Tensta City**.
I worked with great determination, putting in ten to twelve hours a day, building the shops one by one. The only task I couldn't handle myself was the glass installation, which I entrusted to an Iranian glazier. During this time, many approached me to rent the shops; some even offered bribes for priority. I refused them all, stating that only one shop would be leased for each profession to ensure a diverse market, strictly following the registration list.
During this period, Agha Safar often poured his heart out to me about his marital problems. On my next trip to France, I

asked Mr. Banisadr to sign the book *'Women and Marriage'* for Agha Safar as a gift. I hoped it would help him resolve his family issues.

Before that trip, I bought a professional video camera and a still camera. This time, I was better equipped at the seminar and filmed Mr. Banisadr's speeches. After watching the footage several times, I felt it would be a shame for others not to see it. I decided to at least get the audio out to the public. I duplicated several of his speeches and mailed them to friends who couldn't attend, hoping they would spread the word and break the wall of censorship.

I recorded the speeches onto audio tapes, wrapped them in cardboard, and mailed them as postcards to a list of acquaintances in Iran. I was never certain if they reached their destination, but I did everything in my power to crumble the censorship wall built by the Iranian regime, its 'twin' opposition abroad, and state-affiliated media.

I suffered much grief, but the heaviest came from 'our own people.' Those who claimed to have fled the dictatorial regime, yet as soon as the ink on their residency stamp was dry, they headed back to Iran! To me, this was a betrayal—of the truth, of the Iranian people, and of the blood that had been shed. They were essentially telling the world: 'We lied; we distorted the truth for residency; we deserve this regime!'

In Stockholm, five or six local Persian-language radio stations were active, funded by government grants, public donations, and advertising. In practice, these stations were controlled by two specific groups: the authoritarian monarchists and the anti-freedom communists. Both groups competed in their hostility toward the voice of liberty.

If you proposed a free debate instead of spreading lies and slanders—to at least turn the diaspora into a space for the exchange of ideas—they would refuse. They feared an open dialogue with supporters of independence and freedom, knowing that the foundations of their ideologies would crumble in a free discussion. It was as if they had forgotten that a repressive, heavily armed regime was ruling over the lives and property of the people in Iran, shedding blood incessantly.

I remember an American publishing house released a book by Mr. Banisadr regarding the U.S. embassy hostage crisis in Tehran. This book became a bestseller in the United States at the time. During that period, George H.W. Bush, who had gained great popularity leading the Gulf War against Saddam, was confidently preparing for re-election. The publication of that book at that juncture changed many equations. Contrary to popular belief, it wasn't just a political exposé; it was a living document of the lies global powers—both East and West—had constructed about the Iranian people and the 1979 Revolution. In that book, Mr. Banisadr revealed the behind-the-scenes role of certain power factions in the hostage crisis—the same game they played to justify the coup against him and use it as a tool for legitimizing the suppression of the people's voice.

Yet, this book was neither introduced on the Persian radio stations abroad nor even mentioned by the so-called 'opposition' media. It was as if no one wanted the truth to be revealed. It seemed that everyone—from regime supporters to the facade-opposition—agreed on one thing: silence regarding the truth.

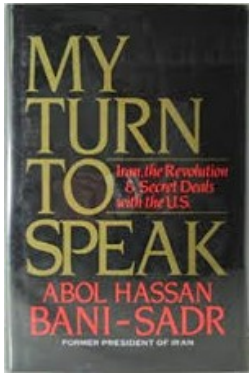
In those days, I told myself once again: 'If I don't do something, if I don't transmit this voice, then who will?' I might not have had a media outlet or a party behind me, but I saw the truth on my side, and that was the greatest power. Gradually, I prepared the recorded speeches of Mr. Banisadr into more compact audio formats and even cassette tapes with simple yet effective covers, distributing them among Iranians abroad with the help of friends. Alongside that, I decided to transcribe a collection of his responses to public questions and provide them to interested readers in the form of simple Persian pamphlets. Some friends would ask: 'What is the point of all this? How many people actually listen? How many actually read?'

I would reply: 'Even if just one more person understands, even if one more person is saved from the trap of censorship, that is enough. We are not responsible for the results; we are responsible for our own actions.'

From the day in Versailles when I first looked into the eyes of Iran's first elected president and saw honesty—from the day I felt the biting cold of his home with my own flesh and

bones and took tea from Mrs. Azra—a covenant was forged in my heart; a covenant that was now part of my very being: To stand by independence, freedom, and truth until my very last breath.

My turn to speak



One of the factors contributing to the decline of George H.W. Bush’s credibility was the publication of the very book Mr. Banisadr had written about the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis. This book, alongside research by American scholars and various articles, pulled back the curtain on a clandestine deal. It was a pact between the Reagan-Bush camp and leaders of the Islamic Republican Party—including Beheshti, Rafsanjani, Khamenei, and Ahmad Khomeini—to delay the release of the American hostages until after the U.S. presidential election.
The exposure of this collusion, later known as the 'October Surprise,' had a clear objective: ensuring Jimmy Carter’s defeat and the victory of Reagan and Bush, thereby paving the way for the coup against Iran’s elected president.
During those days, intense censorship prevailed. Monarchists joined forces with American media, sparing no lies or slanders to tarnish Mr. Banisadr’s reputation. They feared that revealing this secret deal would enlighten the Iranian people about the true roles played in the hostage

crisis and the Shah's transition. They knew if the truth came out, their own credibility would vanish.
In Sweden, Persian-language radio stations remained silent as well. Only one was willing to interview Mr. Banisadr regarding this matter. Even Swedish national television aired a documentary about it only once, in the middle of the night when most people were asleep.
However, amidst this heavy silence, one of the sweetest days of my life occurred: the day President George Bush, the leader of the world’s only superpower, could not prevent the first elected president of Iran from entering the U.S. due to public pressure. Interestingly, at the exact moment Mr. Banisadr’s plane touched down in New York, Mr. Bush was hospitalized with heart palpitations.
A CNN reporter asked Mr. Banisadr: 'Do you believe there is a connection between your arrival in America and Mr. Bush’s hospitalization?'
He replied with composure: 'I hope he recovers quickly so he can answer the questions.'
Shortly after Mr. Banisadr’s return from the U.S., Bush’s popularity plummeted. His rival, Bill Clinton, promised to release the 'October Surprise' and 'Iran-Gate' documents if elected. However, after winning, he chose to settle with the Republicans and kept the files suppressed. Nevertheless, Mr. Banisadr’s prominent presence in Washington for his book launch and his testimony before the joint congressional commission forced the creation of an investigation committee. Although the committee tried to downplay the facts through censorship, they could not deny the essence of the scandal, claiming only that 'conclusive evidence' of the deal was not found.
With the passing of time, missing documents began to surface one by one—including previously ignored reports and evidence of William Casey’s (Reagan’s then-campaign manager) trip to Madrid, which had been scrubbed from U.S. State Department archives. Mr. Banisadr continues to follow this case, as fresh documents or investigative reports occasionally expose new corners of those clandestine ties.
In those years, with minimal resources, we stood our ground against media giants and organized censorship. Standing by the principles of independence and freedom,

and defending the truth, kept us alive and gave us strength. It was this steadfastness that caused most power-hungry groups to fracture and collapse one after another, despite foreign aid and support. Eventually, many devolved into small, scattered factions; some ostensibly joined 'human rights' groups, yet they remain seekers of power, not defenders of liberty. Those few organizations that remain have tied their hopes to the United States and its regional allies, hoping to topple the Iranian regime with foreign help only to replace it themselves—becoming nothing more than tools for foreign powers.

While I was busy constructing the shops for the **Tensta City** arcade, I met many people. One individual insisted I join the company where he worked, but my focus remained on completing the Tensta City project. I handed over all invoices for construction materials to the company accountant, Ms. **May-Britt Sjölund**.

One day, I stepped out of the garage for a break and saw a man named Rajab—a communist political activist—arguing heatedly with Agha Safar. Rajab was furious and shouting: 'Give me my money!'

Agha Safar replied: 'Give me your invoice first, then I'll pay you.'

Rajab yelled: 'I've given you the invoice twice already!'

And Safar calmly said: 'It's lost!

The argument escalated. In a fit of rage, Rajab got into his car, circled back, and sped toward Safar as if to run him over. I immediately stepped in front of the car. He slammed on the brakes and yelled: 'Move! Let me settle the score with this coward once and for all!'

I opened the car door and got in. 'How much does he owe you?' I asked.

'Six thousand kronor,' he replied.

I said, 'Drive to my house; I'll give you the money.'

He looked at me in disbelief. 'But I don't have a claim against you.'

'What difference does it make?' I said. 'You get your money; that's what matters.'

He warned me, 'I know he's going to screw you over too. Let me finish this jerk today.'

I countered, 'Suppose you kill him. You won't get your

money, and you'll go to prison for murder.'
'Don't worry about me...' he muttered.
I managed to calm him down. He drove me home, and I handed him the six thousand kronor. He thanked me and said, 'You saved Safar’s life today. He owes his life to you. I was truly going to end him.' He said his goodbyes and left; I never saw him again, though I later heard he went to Russia.
I returned to the workshop and told Safar what had happened. 'He was extremely angry and had dangerous intentions,' I explained.
But instead of thanking me, he said coldly, 'You shouldn't have paid him.'
I replied, 'You don't need to pay me back. I just wanted to prevent a tragedy.
This wasn't the first time Agha Safar had refused to pay his creditors. Even though his shop’s sales had doubled and the number of customers had increased significantly as the arcade neared completion, he only thought about the present. He had no regard for the future and failed to align his conduct with the gradual growth of the business. His sole focus was on hoarding as much money as possible.
As long as the arcade remained unfinished, he would constantly follow me, telling anyone with a question or business matter: 'Go see Mr. Mansour!'
I leased the shops to applicants of various trades at very reasonable prices. I wasn't seeking excessive profit or high income; I simply took pleasure in what I was doing. I found fulfillment in being useful, in not being a burden on society, and in the fact that I had managed to transform a dilapidated ruin...

Gradually, the Tensta City arcade was transformed from a dilapidated garage into a true shopping center. I provided job opportunities for 38 families who couldn't afford to buy their own shops, offering them the lowest possible rent.
I personally plastered about two thousand square meters of the garage ceiling. In the end, I built 38 shops for 38 different types of businesses, creating a complete and diverse market from scratch—a market where everyone could find exactly what they needed.

TENSTACITY

KAZWAN

I had painted the ceilings, walls, and floors of the arcade myself and handled all the electrical wiring. Only one task remained: our original agreement that the landlord would issue the lease in the name of our newly formed company, **Tensta City**. This was essential so I could draft official contracts for the shopkeepers and have them deposit their rent into the company's formal account.
I asked the company accountant, Ms. **May-Britt Sjölund**, several times: 'Why haven't you brought the contract for me to sign?' Each time she replied: 'The landlord is traveling. I'll speak with him when he returns.'
In the meantime, most shops had opened and were seeing excellent sales. The shopkeepers told me they saw a bright future for this arcade. According to my plan, I intended to procure 40 tables to place in the center of the arcade so people could bring and sell their second-hand household items on weekends. This would draw more crowds, create a vibrant atmosphere, and ultimately increase profits for the shop owners.
Agha Safar stood to gain the most, as he was my partner and owned the large supermarket within the same arcade. Now, 38 permanent households working there had become his daily customers.

To buy the tables, I sought addresses for second-hand furniture centers. One shopkeeper directed me to a large warehouse on the outskirts of Stockholm. I went there with a friend. The warehouse was filled with old furniture, and two African men were busy painting tables. I asked one for the price, and he said, 'I'll get the owner.' The Swedish owner arrived. I told him I needed 40 tables for a flea market. He said, 'I have twenty now and can source the rest.' When I asked the price, he said, '800 kronor each!' I was shocked. 'Are you joking? A brand-new table at IKEA is 300 kronor!' He laughed and said, 'We ship these to Africa. I asked in surprise, 'To Africa? People there don't even have bread to eat!' He replied, 'Yes, but the Swedish government pays us for these, and we ship them under the guise of aid to Africa.' Then, with a laugh reminiscent of certain opportunistic bazaar merchants, he patted his belly and said, 'We are helping!' I felt sickened; I realized some people thrive on the misery of others and amass wealth from the suffering of poor nations.

I returned and told Agha Safar, 'If you have money, pay back some of your debt so I can buy new tables.' He moaned, 'I have none.' So, I went to the shopkeepers, collected one month’s rent in advance, and bought 40 brand-new tables from IKEA. I arranged them in the center of the arcade and began promoting the official grand opening of **Tensta City**.

I paid Mr. Ahad, a local radio owner, to announce the opening, and Mr. Masoud to film it for the local TV station. We counted down the days with excitement. On the big day, the turnout was staggering—about two thousand people attended. We served sweets and drinks, and even had Arabic dance performances!

The news of Tensta City’s success spread quickly. Shopkeepers from the main 'Tensta Centrum' told their landlord, 'If Tensta City continues like this, we won’t have any customers left!' A few days later, the head of **Svenska Bostäder** sent a message requesting a meeting. I accepted. He was very respectful and asked about my future plans. I told him, 'I want to turn the garage opposite Tensta City into an international food court, offering cuisines from various countries to complete this complex.

He listened carefully and then asked: 'For example, if you were in the Rinkeby area, what changes would you make?' I replied: 'If I were in your shoes, I'd transform that large store into an arcade.' He nodded and said: 'That's a good suggestion. What else?' I told him: 'I have as many ideas as you could want, but I want to be the one to execute them.' After a pause, he said: 'Do you realize the impact the opening of Tensta City has had on our shopping center? Our mall is gradually emptying out.' I replied: 'My goal isn't for anyone to suffer; my goal is to create jobs for the unemployed.' He said: 'I am under pressure from the shopkeepers in our mall. I suggest you cooperate with us.' I told him: 'Give me your proposal, and I'll review it.' He made several good offers but finally said: 'In my opinion, you must close down Tensta City.' I replied: 'I will not close Tensta City, but I will consider cooperating with you.' He said: 'Think carefully, but in the end, Tensta City must close.'

I didn't tell Agha Safar about this meeting. I was waiting for the lease for Tensta City to be signed by the landlord first. One day, I saw the building manager standing by his car in front of the arcade. Agha Safar was loading several bags of groceries into the man's trunk. The manager tried to pay, but Safar refused. Later, I realized Safar was bribing him to stay quiet; he had done the same with the health inspector many times.

By then, Safar owed me over forty thousand kronor. He was collecting money from the shopkeepers, telling them it was for their monthly rent, but he never handed the money over to me. Each time he would say: 'I'll pay you soon.

One day, a young man entered the shop with two small carpets. He said, 'My father brought these from Iran as a gift, but my mother is ill and I need money for her treatment, so I'm selling them at a fair price.' I asked, 'How much?' He said, 'Four thousand kronor.' I told Safar, 'These are good rugs and the price is right.' He said, 'I don't want them, you buy them.' I replied, 'I'd like to, but I have no cash; you have my money.'

For some reason, he suddenly said, 'Don't worry about the money; I'll give it to you now.' He told his brother, 'Step aside,' then leaned down, grabbed a screwdriver from

under the counter, and handed it to me. He whispered in my ear, 'Go to the back; there’s a fuse box. Open it. There’s a bundle of cash inside. Take what you need and leave the rest.'

I was astonished that he would hide his money there. I went quietly, opened the fuse box, and pulled out a plastic bundle tucked among the fuses. There were about fifty or sixty thousand kronor rolled up. I took four thousand, closed the bundle, went back to Safar, and said, 'Put it back yourself.' I didn't stop to think why, with all that cash, he refused to pay his debts to me and others. I bought the carpets.

After Safar left, his brother told me, 'Be careful! He’s plotting something against you. I’ve told you many times you’ll regret trusting this man.' I didn't take his warnings seriously. I knew his brother worked for him 'black,' was never even given money for breakfast, and stole from the cash register—Safar himself had said so. I thought he was speaking out of jealousy.

A few days later, I saw the accountant. I asked, 'I heard the landlord is back. Why haven't you brought the contract for me to sign?' She said, 'The landlord says he won't issue the lease in your company's name, only in Safar’s company name.'

I was stunned. 'What do you mean? Wasn't our agreement that the lease would be in our newly registered company's name? The landlord himself said he wouldn't sign until it was registered. Why has it changed now?'

The accountant replied, 'You’re right. Go talk to Safar.

I went to Safar and confronted him. He acted as if he knew nothing. He said: 'What difference does it make? If they write it in my company's name, I’ll just sub-lease that section to Tensta City.'

I replied: 'You have a long history of not paying your debts; how can I entrust the lives of 38 families to you? Stand by your commitment and tell the landlord the lease must be in Tensta City’s name. If not, I’m out.'

He assured me: 'Don't worry. I’ll talk to the landlord. I’ll fix it.'

From that day on, I lost my heart for the work. Safar’s brother, with a sly grin, kept telling me: 'You haven't seen anything yet!'

Two days later, I went back to Safar and asked: 'So, what happened with the contract?'
He said coolly: 'The landlord won't write it in the new company's name; he wants it in my company's name.'
I challenged him: 'Can he force that? You could tell him the contract must be in Tensta City's name—unless you were the one who told him to put it in yours!'
With total indifference, he admitted: 'Yes, I told him to write it in my company's name. And they did. Now, I'll be the one to issue the lease for the new company.'
In that moment, the tower of my dreams collapsed. I was stunned by the meanness and betrayal of a man I had mistaken for a human being. He knew himself that there was no humanity left in him, yet he kept playing the part. After all the hard work I'd put in—and with him still owing me forty thousand kronor—he had left me high and dry. Now I had a choice: continue and suffer further loss, or cut my losses here. I went to the small office I had built for myself in the arcade and sat there. As I was lost in thought, Safar walked in with a glass of tea and said:
'I don't know why you're being so difficult! I mean, it's not really a problem!
I saw he was playing a part again, trying to deceive me once more. I said: 'Why isn't it a problem? I need to install an automatic door for the arcade entrance now, but I have no money. Meanwhile, you personally owe me forty thousand kronor. You also collected rent from several shops and didn't give it to me. Where am I supposed to get the money to build the door?'
He said: 'Is that your problem? I'll be right back.' He returned with twenty thousand kronor and said: 'Here, this is for the automatic door.' Then he left.
I was relieved that at least part of my 'dead' money had been recovered. Honestly, I didn't even have enough for my own living expenses. Now, I had to sit and think whether I could continue with such a person. In any case, I had to settle things with him once and for all.
After Safar left, a young couple named Jamal and Mina, who had rented one of the shops to sell affordable goods, entered my office. They said they had heard Safar had betrayed me—apparently, Safar's brother had told them

something. They had come to find out exactly what had happened. I told them: 'Don’t worry yourselves. It’s not a problem; I’ll handle it.' They said: 'If you need a lawyer, we know a very good one.' I replied: 'Thank you, I’ll let you know if I need one.'
At that moment, I realized: 'If the first brick is laid crooked by the mason, the wall will be crooked even to the heavens.' I shouldn't have let it go this far. Before I drown further, I must do something for myself and those who have trusted me.
That evening, I called May-Britt, the company accountant, and recorded our conversation. We agreed that she would bring me the invoices I had given her the following day. The next morning, Safar came and asked: 'Did you order the automatic door?' I said: 'No, not yet. I will.' He realized I was no longer the Mansour he once knew. He had shattered the bowl of my trust.

The Untrustworthy Accountant and the Search for Justice

"The accountant **charged my invoices to his own firm’s account**. No matter how long I waited, there was no sign of him. When I got home that evening, I called him again and asked, 'Why didn't you show up?'
He said, 'I did come, but I didn't see you.'
Right then, I realized he was **playing games with me**. We agreed he’d come the next day. I sat waiting for him again the following day, but he was a **no-show**. That’s when I knew for sure he had no intention of returning the invoices.
I was sitting in my office, mulling over what to do, when that same couple, Jamal and Mina—who had recently converted to Christianity—walked in again.
Jamal told his wife, 'Honey, you go ahead to the shop. I’ll be there in a minute.'

Then he turned to me and said, 'Don’t tell me it’s nothing. I’ve been watching you today; you’ve been **lost in thought** the whole time.'
I asked, 'You mentioned you know a good lawyer?'
'Yeah,' he replied.
I said, 'I want a lawyer who **stands up for what’s right**, not just for the money.'
He asked, surprised, 'What do you mean by that?'
I explained, 'I mean someone who is committed and **can't be bought**.'
He said, 'That’s the one. He’s got a **strong conscience**.'
'Then please, give me his address,' I said.
He replied, 'Actually, I have to see him tomorrow. If you want, I can **set up an appointment** for you too, and we can go together.
I agreed. I asked them not to breathe a word of this to the other shopkeepers, as I didn't want to upset them. I also asked Jamal to talk to the tenants and suggest forming an **association**, so that from now on, everything in the mall would be done by **collective consent**.
Surprised, he said, "What a great idea! But why suggest this? It could actually **backfire on you**."
"How so?" I asked.
He said, "Maybe later you'll want to get something done, and the others won't go along with it."
I replied, "That’s exactly what I want. Up until now, while we were building this place, I was the one calling the shots. But from here on out, everyone has a **stake** in this. They should decide for themselves how to run and grow the place —even when it comes to raising the rent—whether I’m around or not."
I told him, "My second plan is to put out an advertising magazine to **cut down on costs** for the shopkeepers."
Up to that point, everything was moving along nicely, but Safar was only looking out for **his own interests**, playing with people's lives without a second thought.
I went to him one last time to **give him an ultimatum**. I said, "I want a straight answer from you today. I asked the landlord why the lease for this section isn't written separately. He told me *you* were the one who asked for it to be in your name. Is that true?"

He said, "Yes. You can take it that way."
I said, "But you told me the landlord wouldn't sign the contract in the name of Tensta City Company!"
He replied, "**Well, I've changed my mind now.**"
"Just like that?" I asked.
"Yes," he said, "**Just like that.**"
I said, "Then please tell Maj-Britt to give me back the invoices I handed over to her.
He said, "She's your accountant too; tell her yourself."
I said, "She promised to return the invoices to me, but as far as I can tell, **you're the one holding her back**."
"No, I'm not," he shot back.
"Fine then," I said, "Call her right now, in front of me, and tell her to bring the invoices."
He asked, "Why should I be the one to call?"
I replied, "Because Maj-Britt says Safar is your partner and that you have to **give the green light**."
"What do you want with those invoices anyway?" he asked.
I said, "I want to get the tax refund on the materials. I owe people money, and you're not paying me what you owe."
He said, "I don't have it. Once you collect the rent, deduct my debt from it."
I told him, "Since you've put all the leases in your own name, they legally have to pay the rent to you. Besides, you've already collected rent in advance from many of them and never passed it on to me."
He said, "I don't have it. I'll start paying you back bit by bit from this month."
I said, "**There is no 'this month' anymore.** Your brother was right about you."
I walked away, hoping a lawyer could finally untangle this mess.
The next day, Jamal and I went to see the lawyer. I showed him the documents. He smiled and said, "It's a good thing you didn't hand over the latest invoices to the accountant—including her own fee! This means she is still technically the accountant for Tensta City Company and is **legally obligated** to return all the records."
"But she won't give them back," I said.
He replied, "She doesn't have a choice. **Legally, her hands are tied.**"

He gave me full assurance that we would win the case. He brought out a document, and with my signature, he officially became my legal counsel.
Feeling energized and hopeful, I walked out of his office with Jamal.
I thanked him and said, "He sounds like a good lawyer on paper. I just hope he **walks the walk** as well as he talks."
Jamal replied, "You'll see for yourself."
The following day, we invited Jamal and his wife, Mina, over for dinner. Gradually, we became close friends. Throughout our friendship, I saw Jamal **go to any lengths** to secure his residency. He even changed his faith and became a Christian. He would try to drag others to church with him, just to show the church elders that if he got his papers, he could win others over to Christianity too.
A few times, he tried to argue with me, saying he wanted to convert me as well. But he hadn't studied Islam at all. He would say, "Islam was my father's religion, not my choice. Now, I want to choose my own faith."
I would tell him, "That's your right. But before you switch, you should at least know what you're trading for what. You've only heard the words of a few clerics, not the core of Islam. You haven't read the Quran even once. And now, just because you're bitter about your father's religion, you've picked one that is 600 years older than Islam!"
Unfortunately, he had no logical rebuttal. He would just keep repeating, "Islam is nothing but the atrocities these clerics commit. I never saw any good from Islam, but these Christians have helped me."
One day, I invited them over for kebabs. The topic of pork came up. Jamal asked mockingly, "Why does the Quran say pork is forbidden?"
I said, "It's not just Islam. It's forbidden in Judaism and Christianity too—if you actually bother to read their books. Even modern science considers pork unhealthy. Besides, the Quran even tells Muslims that if your life is on the line, you can eat it just enough to survive."
He asked, "So, you don't eat it either?"
"No," I replied, "We don't."
Then one day he said, "Next week, kebabs are on me."

I said, "Fine, once you get your residency papers, we'll be your guests."
He laughed and said, "Don't worry, I'm not planning to feed you pork!"
The following week, we had a barbecue in the park near our house. As soon as I took the first bite, I noticed how tender the meat was. Mid-chew, I looked at Jamal and asked, "**Where exactly did you buy this meat?**
I saw him glancing at his wife. I asked again. With a mocking laugh, he said, "Come on, it's not pork. I bought it right here in your neighborhood."
I said, "It's very tender. I just want to know what it's called so I can buy it again sometime."
His wife felt forced to bring out the meat packaging. I noticed part of the label had been torn off. I grew suspicious. Looking straight at Jamal, I said, "I hope this isn't pork."
He smiled and asked, "It's not. But what if it were? What would you do?"
I replied, "**To my great regret, we would have to end our friendship.** Friendship is built on respecting each other's beliefs. You know we don't eat pork. If I can't trust you on this, how can I trust you with anything more important?"
He scoffed, "What a childish way to think!"
Yet, he kept insisting it was beef. I grabbed the packaging and said, "I'll be right back."
"Just sit down," he said, "we'll go later."
"No need," I replied. "Enjoy your meal; I won't be long."
I went to the same butcher shop and showed them the package. I said I wanted more of the same. The butcher brought out an identical pack. Without even looking at the label, I asked, "Is this beef?"
He said, "**No, it's pork.** Beef isn't this fatty."
I checked the label myself. Sure enough, it was pork.
I bought the pack, went back, and showed it to Jamal and his wife. I said, "**Here you go, this belongs to you. Eat up—it might just strengthen the foundations of your new faith!**"
The day ended seemingly well, but that was the last time our families ever spent time together.

The Condemnation of Iranian Regime Leaders in the Mykonos Trial

At that time, a legal proceeding known as the **Mykonos Trial** was underway in Germany. The incident involved leaders of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, who were holding a meeting with several others at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin. That night, on the orders of officials from the Islamic Republic, several terrorists stormed the restaurant and opened fire on the attendees.
This time, however, Iranians living abroad pursued the case. A number of brave German lawyers took on the defense, evidence was gathered, and the court was convened to identify and prosecute both the **perpetrators and the masterminds** behind this crime. Consequently, several operatives were identified and taken into custody.
Until that day, the leaders of the *Velayat-e Faqih* regime had been freely assassinating their opponents across the globe, with European governments largely **turning a blind eye** to these atrocities. For instance, in the case of the assassinations of Ghassemlou, Fazil Rasul, and Qaderi in Vienna, the authorities at the time even assisted the terrorists in fleeing the country to avoid arrest and trial.
In the Mykonos case, the prosecutor received a wealth of information from the Iranian community. He also invited Mr. Banisadr to Berlin to provide testimony. Over the course of two days, extensive information was obtained from him. Mr. Banisadr had previously exposed the regime's domestic and international assassination networks in the *Enghelab-e Eslami* publication. A significant portion of the evidence presented to the court had been gathered inside Iran and funneled through Mr. Banisadr to the prosecution and subsequently the court.
The court formally invited Mr. Banisadr, who then detailed the structure and organization of the *Velayat-e Faqih* regime’s assassination apparatus. According to his testimony, the "Supreme Leader" sits at the head of this

organization. The network consists of several branches: one branch compiles the files, while another consists of clerics who review the cases and issue a **jurisprudential ruling (Fatwa)** on the lawfulness of the assassination. Once cleared by this branch, the file is sent for approval to the Leader and the President at the time (Khamenei and Hashemi Rafsanjani). Upon their endorsement, the assassination order is issued. The execution is then carried out by the operational branch in coordination with international networks.

Mr. Banisadr introduced two key witnesses to the court: Witness B and **Witness C**. Witness C was **Abolghasem Mesbahi**, a former high-ranking official and one of the founders of the Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS/VAVAK). After fleeing Iran to Pakistan, he traveled to Europe with the help of Mr. Banisadr's associates to testify. Mesbahi corroborated the information provided by Banisadr, including details about the assassination team, their entry into Germany, and the role of local accomplices.

In response, the Iranian regime claimed Mesbahi was a fraud with no official standing. However, the German prosecution conducted an independent investigation. Documentary evidence, including footage of **Hashemi Rafsanjani's official visit to Georgia**, proved that Mesbahi was part of the high-level state delegation.

It was also revealed that Mesbahi had been dispatched to France twice by **Ayatollah Khomeini** to deliver a personal message to Mr. Banisadr. In these messages, Khomeini had urged Banisadr to return to Iran, acknowledging that "mistakes had been made" and promising to fulfill his conditions. Mesbahi's entry into France was highly coordinated; since he had previously been expelled and barred from the country, the French Ministry of the Interior was tasked with escorting him directly from the airport to Banisadr's residence and back.

In response to Khomeini's overtures, Mr. Banisadr had stated:

"Iran needs a spiritual explosion. Given the scale of these crimes, corruption, and betrayal, my return changes nothing unless Mr. Khomeini appears publicly on television to seek forgiveness from God and the Iranian people for

these atrocities. Only then would my return hold any meaning."

The Mykonos Trial remains one of Europe's most significant political trials of the 1990s. For the first time, the direct involvement of the Iranian leadership in assassinating political dissidents on European soil was officially confirmed.

Despite heavy pressure, repeated threats, and attempts by the Iranian regime to obstruct justice, the court achieved a **historic victory**. After validating the testimonies of Banisadr and Witness C—supported by visas, state films, and confirmations from the French Ministry of the Interior and prestigious lawyers like Mr. Cheron—the court formally rejected the regime's claims and upheld the credibility of the evidence.

In its final ruling, while the names of **Ali Khamenei** and **Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani** were not explicitly written in the sentencing part, the verdict explicitly stated that the **"intellectual authors and masterminds of this crime sit at the highest levels of the government of the Islamic Republic.**

The name of **Ali Fallahian**, the then-Minister of Intelligence, was specifically cited in the verdict, and Interpol warrants were issued for him and several others, ensuring their immediate arrest should they step outside Iran's borders.

This ruling, etched into European legal history as the **Mykonos Verdict**, was not only a turning point against state-sponsored terrorism but also proved that in the heart of Europe, there are still honorable judges who refuse to back down against governments, security apparatuses, and organized terror. They stood courageously in defense of humanity.

The repercussions of this trial transcended the courtroom. European nations, influenced by the verdict, recalled their ambassadors from Iran. In response, the Iranian regime was forced to pledge an end to assassinations on European soil to restore diplomatic ties.

Germany, which until then had been a primary hub for the regime's terror activities in Europe, compelled the Iranian government to dismantle its network under heavy domestic

and international pressure. However, seeking to preserve its reach, the regime scrambled to find a new European center. Their first attempt was to move operations to Spain, but thanks to Mr. Banisadr’s relentless tracking and detailed briefing of Spanish authorities, that plan was **thwarted**.

At the same time, with international pressure peaking, preparations for military action against Iran were taking shape. Relations between Iran and Europe were effectively in **limbo**. To shift this atmosphere, the regime needed an election that would present a "new face" to the world. Thus, **Mohammad Khatami**—who had previously served in the Ministry of Guidance during the Rafsanjani era and in cultural bodies linked to the General Staff of the Armed Forces—was introduced as a "moderate." He received extensive backing from Western outlets like the BBC, Radio Israel, and VOA. This rebrand occurred despite his past record, including his role in sending twelve-year-old children to clear minefields, which remained etched in the nation's memory.

The massive media campaign convinced the public that if Khatami were not elected, not only would the rift with Europe remain unhealed, but Iran would also face an all-out war. In this climate, Khatami ascended to the presidency.

Shortly after these events, a group of fifteen individuals, posing as students, entered Sweden. Among them were several members of the **MOIS (VAVAK)**, tasked with rebuilding the regime’s terror network in Europe. Their primary target: Mr. Banisadr.

During this period, I received an email from Mr. Banisadr. In a follow-up call, he shared critical information: the leader of this group had secretly defected and contacted Banisadr’s associates. He revealed that the fifteen-member squad, led by a high-ranking MOIS official with the rank of Colonel and operating under the **cover of the Ministry of Industries**, had entered Sweden to assess the situation and establish a new hub for intelligence and terrorist operations in Europe.

The defecting MOIS official, who was ready to blow the whistle, revealed that following the Mykonos trial and the dismantling of their European network, the regime was now

looking to establish a new hub in Sweden. He was prepared to hand over all intelligence to the Swedish security authorities.
Mr. Banisadr asked me:
"If you feel you are not in danger and are willing to cooperate, I can provide you with this individual's name and contact information so you can reach out to him..."
I accepted gladly. I didn't want my compatriots' lives to be at risk abroad, nor did I want Sweden to turn into a safe haven for terrorists. Mr. Banisadr gave me the leader's name and phone number, and it was agreed that I would keep him informed of any developments.
From that point on, I was caught in the middle of three simultaneous crises:

1. The assassination squad.
2. The conflict with my partner, Safar, and the company accountant, who had essentially **cleaned me out**.
3. Lack of money, mounting debt, unemployment, and the daily cost of living.

One day, I **took the plunge** and shared the problem with my wife. I told her, "I’m having financial trouble. If you can, try to cut back for a few months and let’s see what happens."
She calmly replied, "Alright."
I was relieved... but not an hour had passed before she said:
"By the way, we’re running out of rice."
I turned and looked at her, saying nothing.
Half an hour later, she said:
"I wanted to buy clothes for the child, but since things are like this, I'll wait."
The third time she started to say something, I went and took some money from the twenty thousand kronor I had received from Safar—which I’d been **saving for a rainy day**—brought it to her and said:
"I’m sorry for making you 'save' for a few hours. My problem is solved."
A family friend, who was like a sister to me, called and invited us to a party. Since I hadn't participated in such gatherings for a while, I declined.
"Why?" she asked.

I said, "Because in these get-togethers, the men sit in one room drinking and disrespecting each other, while the women talk about shopping and daily chores. There’s nothing for the children to learn, and you can't have a serious family, political, or social discussion. We’ve decided to visit families individually, not in groups. At least that way, we know what we can talk about with each family and learn something."
She insisted, saying, "Count me as an exception; I'm your sister."
Eventually, my wife and I accepted. We went to their house that Friday.
One of the guests saw me and said, "Come on, why have you shut your doors to us? Open up, I’ll bring the chicken myself!"
I didn't offer a word in response.
Another guest snapped at him, "Have some shame! What kind of talk is that? Mansour used to invite us multiple times for every one time we hosted him."
I remembered the man who said, "I’ll bring the chicken." I knew his track record all too well.
Once, at a bus stop, I realized my transit pass had expired and I didn't have enough cash on me. I decided to walk. I ran into him on the way. He greeted me and asked, "What’s the news? What brings you here?"
I said, "I was going to take the bus, but my pass is expired and I’m out of cash. So, I’m walking."
I thought to myself, "Two hundred kronor is nothing to him; if I ask, he’ll surely help."
Confidently, I asked, "Do you have two hundred kronor you could lend me?"
He clapped his hand over his pocket and said, "**Nope!**"
And this was a taxi driver who had just finished his shift; he undoubtedly had cash on him.
Now, at this party, in front of everyone, he was saying, "I’ll bring the chicken!"—acting like a **big spender** to make me look like a **cheapskate**.
Another guest was the type who, every time he came to our house, would pull me aside at the door and whisper, "If you ever have financial trouble, just let me know."
This was while he actually owed me money and hadn't paid

it back!
Then there was the one who said at the last party, "If anyone needs a loan, I've got a hundred thousand kronor!" What he really meant was that he was a **loan shark**.
The husband of the woman who was my close friend once called me and said, "My shop was burglarized. The door is smashed, and I can't lock up. Come help me."
I went there with my tools and fixed his door. He asked, "How much for the labor?"
I said, "Don't worry about it, we're friends."
He said, "It's not coming out of my pocket anyway; insurance covers it!"
I replied, "If insurance is paying, give whatever you like. If not, it's fine."
He asked, "Is a thousand okay?"
I said, "Sure."
Some time later, he wanted me to install some lights. I agreed. He bought the lights, and I installed them. He asked, "What's the fee?"
I said, "Whatever you give is fine."
He said, "Is two thousand okay?"
I said, "That's a blessing."
Then he said, "**Now, can you lend me two thousand? I'll pay you back five.**"
I said, "Why not?" and lent him the money.
I was packing up my tools when he said, "What a great toolbox you have! Are you selling it?"
I replied, "It's yours if you want it."
"Why do you want to sell?" he asked.
I said, "Well, I work with these, but I'm too embarrassed to charge anyone for my labor."
"How much?" he inquired.
"Three thousand kronor for everything. Just the drill alone is worth two thousand," I said.
"Will you take two thousand?"
"It's not worth mentioning," I replied.
And so, using the very two thousand kronor he had just borrowed from me, he bought my tools—leaving him owing me a total of five thousand kronor. From that day on, as the saying goes, it was a case of **"Catch me if you can."**

That night, at the insistence of the woman who was like a sister to me, our family was finally guests at their home. As usual, the men gathered in one room where the drinks were flowing, while the women sat together in the lounge.
After a few glasses, as they loosened up and grew more familiar, the teasing began. One of them, who loved being addressed as "Engineer" rather than by his name, turned to me and asked:
"So, what's the news?"
Having no stomach for these kinds of gatherings, I thought to myself:
*Tonight, I must settle the score with these **hollow friendships**. I need to put this group to the test to see where I stand and who can actually be counted on.*
I answered, "I don't have good news. I'm in a **tight spot**."
Everyone fell silent and stared at me.
"What kind of trouble?" one asked.
"Why? What happened?" said another.
"Financial trouble," I replied.
"How much?" they asked.
"Two hundred thousand kronor," I said.
I continued, "You are my only friends. If each of you could lend me forty thousand, my problem would be solved."
"Are you joking?" one asked.
"What do you need it for?" asked another.
"For how long?" a third chimed in.
"Two to three months," I said.
They all traded glances. A **dead silence** filled the room.
I said, "To be honest, last night I was at the house of someone I've only met a few times. He was willing to lend me a hundred thousand, but I turned him down because I was counting on you. Now, if you can't manage forty thousand each, just give me twenty thousand apiece, and that will solve it.
The interrogation started again:
"What do you need it for?"
I replied, "What difference does that make to you? Either you trust me or you don't. Imagine I have a contagious disease—how does knowing the exact type help you? If you can help, help. If not, no hard feelings."

The stuttering and hesitations began once more. I already knew they were men of words, not action. That night, I was certain.
To break the tension, I tried to shift the mood. The host, who owed me five thousand kronor, gave me a meaningful look as if to ask, "Is your problem really that serious?"
I gave him a quick wink, signaling it was a joke.
Suddenly, he grew bold and said:
"I'll have it ready for you by tomorrow."
His remark prompted the other one—the one who had previously claimed, "I have a hundred thousand if anyone needs a loan" (meaning he was a loan shark)—to chime in:
"I'll let you know by tomorrow too."
But the taxi driver and the other one who owed me ten thousand kronor stayed silent. Even the "Engineer" had been struck dumb!
I stood up, opened the door, and called for my wife. She came and stood at the doorway.
"What happened?" she asked.
I said, "If I ever go on a journey and something happens to me and I can't return, and you struggle with the rent, go to the owner of this house first. If he doesn't have it, go to that other one. If he doesn't have it either, don't go to anyone else."
Then I turned to the group and said:
"Don't worry... I was just joking."
Upon hearing this, their faces darkened. They were offended. After realizing they had failed the test of friendship, one by one they grumbled:
"What kind of joke was that?"
From that day on, I never counted on any of them as a true friend.

Entangled with the Swedish Secret Service (SÄPO)

Using the number I had received from Mr. Banisadr, I called the leader of the assassination squad that had arrived in Sweden. I set up a meeting, gave him the location, and swapped descriptions of what we'd be wearing.
The next day, I went to the rendezvous wearing clothes that didn't quite match the description I'd given, and I didn't see anyone matching his either. I had to call him. That's when I noticed someone a few meters away reaching into his pocket and pulling out a phone. I hung up and walked toward him. He hadn't stuck to the dress code either. I introduced myself, and we walked back to my place.
I questioned him about his rank in the **MOIS (VAVAK)**. He showed me mission logs and documents proving he had accompanied high-ranking regime officials on various trips. I made copies of everything, including the list of his associates. Then I asked:
"Are you willing to cooperate with the Swedish police regarding this terror network?"
"Yes," he said, "but on one condition: my wife must be extracted from Iran first."
He assured me she was currently in a safe house. We parted ways; he was living in a town near Stockholm.
I drafted a letter to the Prime Minister's Office, reporting that fifteen individuals had entered Sweden from Iran—some of whom were regime agents planning to establish a new European terror hub. I stated that their leader was ready to defect and help dismantle the network. I included Mr. Banisadr's phone number and my email and dropped the letter in the PM's mailbox.
As soon as I got home, the phone rang.
"Hello?"
A Swedish voice asked, "Mr. [Name]?"
"Speaking. Who is this?"
"I'm calling from the **Swedish Secret Service**. We want to discuss your letter."
"How did you get my number?" I asked.
He laughed. "I'm with the Secret Service..."
"Well, the addresses are at the bottom of the letter," I noted.
"We need to meet you," he insisted.

I reluctantly agreed. We set a meeting point near a large cathedral in the city center. He gave me the car's make and color. I informed Mr. Banisadr and headed out the next day. From a distance, I scoped out the area and spotted the car. The driver was outside, his eyes scanning for me.
From experience, I knew these agents usually travel in a **convoy**—one car for the meet and others for **backup and tailing**. I walked up to the second car, parked about 15 meters behind, opened the door, and hopped in.
I told the driver, "Tell your partner I'm in here."
He gave me a bewildered look before calling him: "The target is here."
The car started moving. They took a fifteen-minute route for a five-minute drive to **mask our destination**. We arrived at a facility. Once inside the compound, they blindfolded me so I wouldn't know where I was being taken.
When they removed the blindfold, I found myself in a room with a round table in the center. An agent was waiting; he introduced himself using a **codename**. We sat down, and the questioning began.
One of them asked, "How did you identify him?"
I replied, "I don't know him personally. He was acquainted with Mr. Banisadr's associates and had funneled this information through them."
"Why do you believe he is an MOIS agent?" he pressed.
"I've seen his documents," I said. "They show he was assigned various missions by regime officials and accompanied them on high-level trips."
He asked, "How can you be sure he's telling the truth? Perhaps this is a **ploy** to infiltrate your organization."
"You have a point," I conceded. "That is a possibility..."
From then on, they stopped asking about him. Their questions shifted toward me and my relationship with Mr. Banisadr.
"How many others like you are collaborating with Mr. Banisadr in Sweden?"
"What is the name of your organization?"
"Why were we unaware of your organization's existence until today?"
"How many members do you have?"

They demanded that I hand over the names of our members. Finally, they asked, "How much money do you receive from Mr. Banisadr?"
I replied, "Our organization is called the **Association of Iranian Islamic Assemblies**. I cannot give you the names of the individuals; if I did, the Iranian regime would discover their identities."
They countered, "How could the Iranian regime find out? We need to know so we can ensure their security."
I told them bluntly, "You know better than I do that the Swedish government has agreements with Iran and that information is exchanged. My political identity has remained **under the radar** until now, but if anything happens to me or my family from this moment on, you will be held responsible. Do not ask me again for my friends' names."
I continued, "As for the money Mr. Banisadr supposedly gives us: those who pay their supporters are usually on the payroll of foreign governments themselves, and their members are mere **mercenaries**. You know well that Mr. Banisadr is not seeking power. If he were, he would still be the President of Iran, not an exile in France whom the regime is constantly trying to assassinate. He threw the titles of President and Commander-in-Chief back at the face of despotism, choosing independence and freedom instead. He is independent, and he expects us to be the same. That is why you were unaware of our presence in Sweden. To maintain our independence, we have never accepted help from any government, and we never will. It may surprise you, but we are a group of Iranians working toward establishing democracy in Iran, funding our own lives and political activities because we are not after power."
It was clear from their expressions that they were not pleased with my answers. One of them asked sharply, "Does this mean you don't trust us and refuse to cooperate?"
I replied, "**If you speak to me with that tone of anger, I will stop answering your questions altogether.**
His colleague, seeing that things were heading south, asked him to step out and cool off. But he refused, snapping angrily, "So, you’re not going to cooperate?"

I remained silent and stood up. His colleague also rose and asked him to leave the room so that a third colleague, a woman, could come in and speak with me.
I couldn't tell if they were playing parts to intimidate me, but it reminded me of interrogations in Iran: one interrogator threatens and shouts, then another comes in to lead him away, only for the aggressive one to return later. It’s a tactic designed to make the detainee realize that if they don't cooperate with the "nice" one, the harsh one will be back.
The man was ushered out of the room, grumbling, by his colleague. The other agent came in, shook my hand, and asked me to sit. I sat down; he smiled and de-escalated the atmosphere. He then asked a few general questions about the hijab in Islam and why women inherit half as much as men.
I explained: "The hijab, in the sense of covering the hair, also exists in Judaism and Christianity, but it is not explicitly mandated in the Quran. No crime regarding the lack of hijab is defined in the Quran. Regarding inheritance, the Quran states that the man is responsible for the family's expenses, while the woman is exempt. A woman's financial rights are structured to ensure her financial independence and her right to make her own decisions. The division of inheritance in the Quran only applies to those who die without a will; if a will exists, it takes precedence. Based on the financial obligations of the man and the rights of the woman, the assets are divided. While it is true a woman inherits half of what a man does, she has no financial liabilities. Whatever wealth she possesses is hers alone to use freely. However, the man—who seemingly inherits twice as much—is responsible for all living costs, the family, his wife, and children. In fact, a man is expected to pay his wife for the work she does within the home..."
He was astonished by this explanation and could hardly believe it. I told him, "If you’d like, I can answer more of your questions another time."
He replied, "I just wanted to know a bit about the situation in Iran before my colleagues returned."
Both of his colleagues then re-entered and took their seats. This time, they asked pleasantly: "Has anything ever

happened to Iranian dissidents here in Sweden that would make you distrust us?"
I smiled and said: "**Until today, every assassination carried out by the Iranian regime abroad has been met with closed eyes from local authorities. In some cases, secret services and police have even escorted terrorists to the airport to ensure their identities weren't compromised, just to avoid having to arrest and prosecute them.**
They were clearly not expecting to hear this; perhaps they didn't think Iranians were aware of the **corrupt back-channel dealings** between governments.
They asked, "Who do you think is spying for the regime here in Sweden?"
I replied, "You are officers of the Swedish Security Service. You know better than I do about the **clandestine meetings** the Iranian embassy holds with so-called dissidents. Lately, some of these meetings have even become public."
They said, "We admit that, but we don't know all of them. We want to know who *you* know that we might have missed."
I told them, "These individuals are mostly to be found among those who have **business dealings** with Iran."
"For example, who?" they pressed.
I only mentioned the name of a bookstore whose owner had held private meetings with the Iranian ambassador, Mr. Qashqai. To my surprise, they immediately blurted out the owner's full name. That’s when I knew for certain that my information was accurate—and that he wasn't just meeting with the ambassador, but was involved in other **private sessions** as well.
They asked, "Okay, and then?"
I mentioned the names of a few others I suspected; for instance, the owner of a carpet shop on a certain street. Once again, they recited the owner’s full name without hesitation.
I said, "It’s good that you know them all. Does that mean they are all cooperating with you?"
He smiled and said, "That’s exactly why I asked you: how can you be sure this person is an MOIS agent and isn't

lying? He might be an operative himself, using this as a **pretext** to get asylum in Sweden, only to **infiltrate** opposition organizations and feed information about members and activities back to the Iranian embassy. This has happened many times."

I replied, "That is precisely why we handed the names over to the Swedish government for investigation. If he is telling the truth and they intend to establish a terror hub for the regime's network in Europe, the existence of such a center is a threat to the security of Sweden and other European nations. The lives of dissidents in Sweden and across Europe will always be **at stake**. Therefore, it is best that you are aware of them and keep them under **surveillance**."

He nodded in agreement and said, "We must see him and speak with him first."

I said, "As stated in the letter, his condition for cooperation is that you first **extract** his wife from Iran."

They countered, "We need to talk to him first to verify whether he is truly an intelligence officer or not; only then will we address other matters."

"Fine," I said, "I'll speak with him and let you know if he agrees."

I said my goodbyes and left the building. Knowing that from now on my mobile phone would be **monitored** and could be used to track me, I made a point of only calling him from public payphones in different neighborhoods.

After leaving the building, I called him and said, "They want to verify your identity as a VAVAK agent first."

He agreed to meet with them.

I went home, called Mr. Banisadr, and reported the meeting to him. Then, I contacted the **Secret Service (SÄPO)** and told them we could meet. We agreed to a rendezvous at eleven o'clock at a hotel they specified.

I coordinated with the VAVAK agent and we met up. We took a city bus to the location. The VAVAK agent scanned the surroundings and whispered, "There are at least a few undercover officers here right now **staking us out**."

I asked, "Like that man by the phone booth reading the newspaper?"

"Yes," he replied.

Eleven o'clock came and went, but no one approached us. The VAVAK agent said, "Get up, let's leave."
"Why?" I asked.
He said, "I'm an intelligence officer myself; every second matters to us. I know they are here and have us under **surveillance**. They want to force us to go home so they can **tail** me, find out where I live, arrest me, and hand me over to Iran."
I asked, "Why do you think they would hand you over to Iran?"
"Because Sweden has a security cooperation agreement with Iran," he replied.
Suddenly, he grabbed my arm and said, "Stand up!"
I saw the man who had been reading the newspaper now inside the phone booth, talking to someone. The VAVAK agent said, "You were right, he's an agent and he's reporting on us."
He pulled my arm and said, "Let's go."
"Are you sure?" I asked.
"Yes, let's go. I sense danger," he insisted.
I told him, "Wait a moment, sit right here until I get back."
"Don't go," he warned, "they want to separate us."
"Trust me," I said.
He looked at me and let go of my arm. I walked over to the phone booth and stood there. I realized he was speaking English. I tapped his arm and said in Swedish:
"**Tell your colleague that if he doesn't show up for the meeting, he won't see him again.**"
He replied in English, "What are you talking about?
The Swedish agent asked me to wait in the adjacent room. I sat there, and through the half-open door, I could hear their muffled voices. After about forty-five minutes, the agent came out and asked me to return to the main room.
As soon as I sat down, I looked at the VAVAK agent. He seemed tense. The Swedish officer turned to me and asked, "Why are you so insistent that he doesn't talk about internal Iranian politics? We need a full picture to understand the threat."
I replied firmly, "My goal is to dismantle the **terror cells** that threaten lives here in Europe. I am not here to provide you with a political map of the opposition for your

intelligence archives. If you start digging into the names of activists and internal party structures, you are stepping out of the bounds of our agreement."
The agent leaned forward, "We are the ones providing security here. We decide what is relevant."
I smiled coldly and said, "And I am the one who brought you the source. If I feel this is turning into a general intelligence-gathering mission against the Iranian diaspora, I will advise my contact to stop speaking immediately. We are collaborators against terrorism, not
your **informants** on the democratic movement."
The room went silent. The VAVAK agent looked down at the table. He knew that if I pulled the plug on the meeting, his chance for protection and getting his wife out of Iran would vanish.
The Swedish officer eventually sighed and signaled to the interpreter. "Fine. Let's get back to the specifics of the Sweden-based operatives. Names, addresses, and the **front companies** they are using.
The Swedish agent looked at the interpreter, who translated my words. After hearing the translation, the agent glanced at me and the VAVAK operative, swallowed his anger, and asked me to take my seat. I sat back down, and the agents shifted the focus back to the terror network and the individuals collaborating with the regime.
Eventually, they thanked the VAVAK operative for his cooperation and said, "That will be all for today."
I added, "This gentleman is cooperating because we don't want terrorists to make Sweden as unsafe as Iran."
They smiled and brought out some coffee. Before I could even take a sip, the Swedish agent I had met before asked me to step into the adjacent room for a private word.
We sat down, and he reached into his pocket, pulling out a thick roll of banknotes. He urged me to take the money.
"What is this for?" I asked.
"He is staying with you," he said. "You have expenses."
I replied, "As long as he is at my house, he is my guest. From the moment he established contact with you, his expenses are your responsibility."
"Well, just take this and keep it with you," he persisted.
I looked him in the eye and said, "No, I won't take it."

"Fine," he said, "call it taxi fare."
"We came by bus," I retorted, "and I have a monthly transit pass."
He wouldn't let it go and kept insisting. I finally said, "If it's for him, give it to him directly. Why give it to me?"
In reality, he was trying to **buy me off**. He was visibly frustrated that I wouldn't accept the cash. Seeing he had failed, he looked disappointed, shook my hand, and asked, "How do you plan on leaving?"
"The same way we came," I answered.
"I'll have the driver drop you off in the city center," he offered.
I realized I had no way out of this offer. I was certain they intended to **tail** us, wait for us to separate, and then arrest him to deport him back to Iran. I agreed, saying, "The city center is fine; we need to do some shopping anyway."
I thought to myself: The crowds in the city will give us a better chance to **shake them off**.
We got into the car. We knew several other vehicles were following us in a **convoy**. As we neared the city center, we got stuck in heavy traffic. Seeing the perfect opportunity, I told the driver, "We'll get out here."
We threw open the doors and sprinted toward the subway station.
We jumped onto the first train. At the next stop, we hopped off and caught a train in the opposite direction. I escorted him to the Central Station, where he boarded a train heading toward his place of residence. Once his train departed, I returned home, feeling relieved.
The moment I stepped inside and opened the door, the phone rang. I picked up immediately. It was the same agent who had tried to bribe me.
"I just wanted to make sure you made it home safe," he said.
"Yes, we’re back. Thank you," I replied.
"Is your friend with you?" he asked.
"Yes, he's in the shower," I lied.
"We need to see him again," the agent insisted.
I reminded him, "Our agreement was that you’d talk to him once, and once you were satisfied he was telling the truth, you’d arrange to get his wife out of Iran. Once she's in

Sweden, he'll provide everything you need to dismantle the terror network."
"I'll speak with my superior and get back to you," he said.
The next day, he called back. "The associates of this VAVAK agent have returned to Iran; they are no longer at the hotel."
I didn't know what he was playing at. "I'll look into it," I replied.
I went to a public payphone and called the agent to tell him what happened. "Call me back in half an hour," he said.
When I called back, he told me, "They lied to you. My associates are all still at the hotel."
"How do you know?" I asked.
"I called the hotel and asked to speak with so-and-so. They connected me, and I heard their voices."
"Why would they lie about that?" I wondered.
"They probably thought you'd be in a rush and call from your own phone, allowing them to trace me," he explained. "Or they expected me to call the hotel from my own line, and since they have informants in every hotel, they'd find my location."
"So you're 100% sure they are still there?"
"Positive."
I hung up and called my contact at the Secret Service. "I didn't expect you to **play games** with me," I told him.
"Why would you say that?"
"Because none of them have left Sweden. They are all still at the hotel. Now the agent thinks you're planning to arrest him and deport him to Iran. He refuses to cooperate further unless his wife arrives in Sweden. You need to talk to your boss."
An hour later, he called back. "We cannot extract her from Iran directly, but we can bring her to Sweden once she reaches Turkey."
"I'll let you know after consulting with Mr. Banisadr," I said.
I reported everything to Mr. Banisadr. A few days later, word came that his wife had successfully left Iran and was now in Turkey. I called the contact and said, "She's out of Iran and currently in Turkey. You can issue the visa now.
He couldn't believe it and asked, "Where exactly in Turkey?"

"She is in a safe location," I replied.
"I'll get back to you and let you know what she needs to do," he said.
Shortly after, he called again. "Tell his wife to go to the Swedish Embassy in Turkey tomorrow at such-and-such a time to have the visa stamped in her passport."
"Fine, I'll let you know," I said.
I contacted the VAVAK agent and told him, "They say your wife needs to go to the embassy."
Aware of potential traps, he said, "Tell them she won't go herself. Someone else will take her passport to get the visa stamped, as she might be compromised."
I relayed this to the contact. He initially objected but eventually agreed. The visa was issued, and his wife arrived in Sweden.
The day after her arrival, the Swedish Secret Service (SÄPO) agent informed me that they wanted to see the VAVAK agent and his wife. I agreed and went to the meeting point.
The Swedish contact said, "There is no need for you to be present in this meeting."
I told the VAVAK agent, "They don't want me here. If you want me to stay, tell them. It's better for you if your link to me isn't severed. If it is, I won't be able to track what happens to you. There's no telling if they'll release you after the **debriefing** or if you'll fall back into the hands of the regime's executioners."
He told the interpreter, "Tell them I want him to stay."
The Swedish agent countered, "It’s better for your own sake not to be involved. Something might happen to you."
"Like what?" I asked.
He said with a smile, "A car might run you over."
"I’m taking that 'joke' seriously," I replied, "and I will inform Mr. Banisadr."
I called Mr. Banisadr and reported the threat.
He said, "Call them right now and tell them that from this moment on, they are not to contact you or interfere with your life. Tell them: 'Banisadr has nothing to gain or lose from you. If you continue to harass him, I will hold a press conference and **blow your cover**.' Tell them I said this

VAVAK agent also has a file with the French police, and from now on, we will track his case through France."
I delivered this message to the contact person.
He said, "Mr. Banisadr doesn't make decisions for us."
"He doesn't make decisions for you," I replied, "but I follow his decisions."
From that day on, our contact was severed, and I heard nothing more about the fate of the VAVAK agent and his wife. This gave me the opportunity to deal with my own problems regarding the company accountant, Ms. Maj-Britt Sjölund. I wanted to recover all the purchase documents she held and refused to return.
The journalist's words hit me hard. He continued, "The shopkeepers told me that since you left, the mall has spiraled into chaos. They feel abandoned. They specifically asked me to find you because they want the public to know what has happened to Tensta City."
I agreed to the interview. We met a few days later. I explained how I had built that place from the ground up, with the hope of creating a thriving community hub. I told him about the **breach of trust**, how my partner Safar and the accountant, Maj-Britt, had **conspired** behind my back to seize the assets and even embezzle the tax refunds.
"It's not just about the money," I told the reporter. "It's about the people who put their livelihoods into that mall. Seeing it turn into a **den for drug dealers** while the management only cares about squeezing every last krona out of the tenants is heartbreaking."
The journalist took extensive notes and promised to investigate the connection between the accountant and Safar's shell companies.
Meanwhile, my lawyer was moving forward with the **criminal charges**. He told me, "We have clear evidence of **financial fraud**. The fact that she claimed the VAT refund using your company's invoices while working for your rival is a major red flag for the authorities. We are going to hold them accountable."
But even with the legal wheels turning, the daily struggle remained. Sitting in my Swedish language class, surrounded by other immigrants, I felt the weight of my

debts. I was starting over, literally from ABC, while the project of my life was being dismantled by **crooks**.
I agreed to the interview. He came to my home and we had a lengthy, in-depth session. Afterwards, he reached out to the accountant for her side of the story, but she flatly refused. In fact, she went as far as to **threaten him**, warning that there would be 'consequences' if he dared to publish anything.
The journalist also contacted Safar himself, who had by then become the primary owner of the garage-turned-mall. After hearing everyone's side, the reporter turned to me and said, 'You are the only one who spoke honestly. Their fear of being interviewed proves they have something to hide.'
He told me, 'I will transcribe your interview and publish it in the **Tensta local newspaper**.'
I felt a surge of relief. In this foreign land, I had finally found someone willing to stand by me and **expose the truth**.

The Takeover Strategy: Confronting the Power Players

A few days later, several shopkeepers contacted the primary landlord, the head of **Riksbyggen**, to complain about the mall's decline. They revealed that Safar was only interested in hiking the rents while neglecting the building's maintenance. The landlord, in turn, told them that Safar had been defaulting on his own payments, claiming the tenants weren't paying him.
The landlord had issued multiple warnings to Safar, telling him bluntly, "You are incapable of managing this place; you must hand it over to someone who can."
In response, Safar had accepted a **400,000-krona kickback** to recommend a man named George—who had

long had his eye on the mall—as the new manager.
However, the landlord was wary. Given the shopkeepers' protests and the legal action I had initiated against Safar and the accountant, he feared being implicated in a **bribery scandal**.
To de-escalate the situation, the landlord told the tenants, "If Mansour is willing to take over the management, have him come speak with me."
Initially, I was reluctant to shoulder the responsibility again, but the shopkeepers insisted: "You built this place; you're the only one who knows how to run it. Anyone else will just **line their own pockets**."
I finally agreed and went to meet the landlord with two representatives from the shops. We were well-received. The head of Riksbyggen asked the others to wait outside so he could speak with me privately.
Inside his office, I saw a large, imposing man standing with his back to us, staring out the window. As we entered, he turned around, and the landlord introduced him: "This is our company's legal counsel." I immediately sensed he was there to **size me up** and determine if I posed a legal threat to them.
The landlord looked at me and asked, "How much are you willing to pay us to take over the mall?"
I replied, "The rent is clearly defined."
"Everyone has to pay rent," he countered dismissively.
I said, "But you admitted yourself that Safar hasn't paid in a long time. I, however, will pay the rent on time."
The landlord then revealed his hand: "There’s another party interested who is willing to pay up to 800,000 kronor. I’m not interested in **small-time games**."
Then, with a mocking tone, he asked, "How much do you pay your lawyer? Two thousand? Three thousand?" He pointed to his own imposing counsel and added, "This lawyer here is expensive. We’re in no hurry; we’ll just wait until your lawyer is close to winning, and then we’ll simply **buy him off**."
This was the second time a corporate head had flaunted his wealth and the power of his legal team to intimidate me.
I asked, "I’ve filed a complaint against the accountant and Safar; why does that upset you to the point of wanting to

buy off my lawyer?"
The landlord laughed. "Safar didn't pocket all those rents alone; he made sure we got our cut too."
I replied, "I knew he had bribed your representatives several times, but I didn't realize the money had reached your pockets as well."
He said, "It was a pleasure meeting you. We will review both your financial standing and George's to see who has the capacity to pay the rent, and then we'll let you know."
I looked him in the eye and said, "You've already made your choice. I know you're fully aware of the **shady deal** between George and Safar. Safar took a 400,000-krona kickback to sell the mall to George for a symbolic one krona. All that's left is your share, which he will undoubtedly pay. You only brought me here today to put a **legal facade** on this for the shopkeepers."
I said my goodbyes and left the office. The two shopkeepers waiting for me asked, "Did he agree to give you the management?"
"No," I told them. "Everything was predetermined. The mall has already been sold to George. They just used us to make the process look legitimate."
I called my lawyer and reported the meeting with the Riksbyggen head. "They're taking the mall from Safar to give it to someone else," I explained. "They claim Safar defaulted on rent, but it's clear a massive amount of money has changed hands under the table. They're just in a rush to **wash their hands** of him now.
I asked the lawyer, "Are you still certain we'll win?"
"I guarantee it," he replied. "You have proof that you paid the accountant, and she admitted receiving that money for meetings with the landlord. Rest assured, you are the winner in this case."
I told him, "If you succeed, I'm willing to give you a **20% bonus** from whatever settlement we recover from them."
The lawyer was thrilled, confident in the outcome. "I promise everything will end in your favor, even if you don't give me a penny extra," he said.
I felt a wave of relief, thinking I could finally settle my debts. But then, a few days passed...

The journalist who had interviewed me called and said he needed to see me. "Come over to my place," I said. When he arrived, he looked absolutely **dejected**.
"What happened?" I asked.
He opened his bag, pulled out an envelope, and handed it to me. "I had transcribed the interview and it was ready for print," he said. "But the editor-in-chief of the *Tensta Tidning* newspaper **blocked the publication**, and I've been fired."
He was deeply upset, not for himself, but because he couldn't finish what he started. "Don't worry about my job," he added, "I have plenty of other work. I'm just devastated that I couldn't get your story out there.

Stockholm 13/3-97

Hej Mansour!

Som du förhoppningsvis redan hört, så stoppade alltså stadsdelsnämnden artikeln om alla turer kring Tensta City, efter påtryckningar av bland annat Riksbyggen. Fegt och förbannat tråkigt, tycker jag. Jag är givetvis fri att gå till vilken tidning som hälst och publicera materialet. Om du skulle vilja använda det jag skrivit på något sätt, så vill jag att du först hör av dig till mig. Om det händer något nytt när polisen börjar utreda din anmälan, så får du mer än gärna höra av dig till mig på telefon: 668 12 30, fax: 668 12 33. Jag tänker avvakta ett tag med att gå till någon annan tidning, men uppkommer nya fakta så tveka inte att slå en signal.

Vänliga hälsningar

[redacted]

I felt a deep sense of regret and said, "I never imagined this would happen to you. Do you have any idea who is behind this?"
He replied, "I believe the head of **Riksbyggen** pressured my editor-in-chief to kill the story."
He handed me the transcript of the interview and added, "Call me if you ever need anything." After he left, I was

devastated that he had lost his job because of me. This was happening in a country whose reputation for democracy and social justice was a model for the world. Who would believe such things happen in Sweden? Apparently, everywhere in the world, money can buy justice, human rights, honor, and conscience. Here, too, freedom seems to depend on the size of one’s bank account.

After the journalist left, I called my lawyer to tell him what happened. He sounded strained, only muttering, "Yes... yes..."

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

He replied, "I need to tell you the truth; the more I think about it, the more I see **no grounds to pursue your case**."

He was no longer talking about victory; he said he could no longer represent me. I realized the mall owner had executed the final stage of his "coup" by buying off my lawyer. I remembered the head of Riksbyggen’s words: *"We’re in no hurry; once your lawyer is close to winning, we’ll just buy him off."*

The lawyer’s withdrawal actually gave me a strange sense of confidence—it meant he had found enough evidence to make them feel threatened enough to bribe him. I went to collect my documents and asked him point-blank: "Tell me, is my complaint baseless, or do you just refuse to continue?"

He simply said, "I’m too busy; I can’t go on."

I took my files and went home. I called a friend who was a staunch believer in Swedish democracy. He was upset but skeptical. "Maybe you just had a bad lawyer," he said. "I know a lawyer who loves these kinds of battles and isn't afraid of anyone."

We made an appointment and went to see him. He looked at my documents and said, "This is excellent; everything is in your favor." He accepted the case. I was filled with hope. As I was filling out the **power of attorney** form, he stopped. "Wait, let me call the police and check the status of the investigation."

After the call, he let out a heavy sigh. "I cannot take your case."

"Why?" I asked.

"I shouldn't tell you this," he whispered, "but your file has been **buried**. The people who buried this case are so

powerful that no lawyer can reopen it. I don't want you to waste your money; you won't get any results."
I turned to my friend and said, "Do you believe me now? Until a person is caught in the gears themselves, they cannot judge." He finally admitted that, in the face of such power, human rights were nothing but a joke.
For a few days, I was deeply depressed. I couldn't wrap my head around the fact that money had triumphed over justice. It was hard to accept that those who had caused me so much suffering were sleeping soundly, while I was the one left carrying the burden of broken laws. My financial situation was worsening by the day. I was stuck between a rock and a hard place.
Someone suggested I apply for **social welfare (Socialbidrag)**, but I was too proud. I had always been financially independent, and the thought of relying on handouts was soul-crushing. Despite my resistance, my wife eventually went to the social office. They turned her away, telling her that since her husband was the "head of a company," he should be the one providing for her! She returned home empty-handed and ashamed.
I kept searching for a way to pursue my case, hoping someone in this country would help. But every time I turned on the TV, I saw scenes of people rescuing a cat from a tree or sending aid to Africa. People abroad envied us, saying, "How lucky you are to live in Sweden." But in my real life, those scenes were nowhere to be found.
One day, as I left my Swedish class, I felt I was being followed. I ducked into a corner and waited. I was right; it was my contact from the VAVAK case. I approached him. He smiled and said, "I'd like to invite you for a coffee."
"I'm not in the mood for coffee," I replied.
"Then choose whatever drink you like," he insisted. "I want to talk to you."
Reluctantly, I agreed, and we went to a café near the school. He asked, "What will you have?"
"Nothing, thank you," I said.
"How about tea?"
"Tea, then," I replied, "provided I pay for it myself."
He laughed. "But your financial situation isn't exactly great."

"I have enough for my tea and your coffee," I retorted. "Order a pastry too, if you like; it's on me."
After he ordered, he cut to the chase. "What have you been up to?"
"I hope you haven't been spending your time tailing me just to ask that," I said. "You've checked my bank accounts; you know exactly how I'm doing. For a few weeks now, I've just been studying Swedish."
He asked, "What about your company? I heard you've run into some trouble."
"The police have **buried my file** so deep that no lawyer can help me," I replied.
"Was Tensta City owned by Mr. Banisadr?" he asked.
"No, it was mine, and I'm still in debt to several people because of it."
Then came the hook: "If you want, everything can be fixed."
"How?" I asked.
He looked at me and said, "**Just come visit us once a week and keep us updated on the situation in Iran.**
I finally understood who had buried my case and silenced my lawyer. I knew the mall owner was behind the journalist's firing and the suppressed interview, but the police freezing the investigation was not his doing. I asked, "If I cooperate with you, will the police reopen the Tensta City case?"
"If you wish," he replied, "everything will return to normal."
I said, "So you are the ones who halted the legal process, and if I don't cooperate, I have to forget about Tensta City?"
He confirmed with a slight nod of his head.
I looked at him and said, "Now my mind is at ease. From today, I will no longer pursue the Tensta City complaint. I will wait until my homeland is free; only then will I seek justice. As for you, if you want to know about the situation in Iran, my only advice is to subscribe to the *Enghelab-e Eslami* publication. By reading it, you will understand exactly what is happening there. I ask you to tell your superiors to stop supporting this regime, because the future belongs to the people."
He stood up and said goodbye. I went to the cashier to pay for the tea and coffee, but he said, "It's already taken care of." I turned and thanked the agent. I never heard from

them again, though my phone remained under full surveillance.
Later, I went to Tensta City to update a few people who were following my case. I was talking to the owner of a carpet shop when Safar burst in. He shouted at the shopkeeper, "Don't let these scoundrels into your shop! He’s having an affair with my wife!"
The shopkeeper laughed and said, "Say something believable, Safar. That's a label that will never stick to Mansour."
Upset by the remark, Safar stormed out.
Reza asked me, "What was that about? Did you go to his wife's shop?"
"Yes," I replied. "I took the affidavit regarding the construction of Tensta City to her, and she signed it."
He laughed and said, "Good for her!"
Not even half an hour passed before a loud commotion broke out in the mall. We went outside and saw someone standing toe-to-toe with Safar, hurling the vilest insults at him. Safar didn't dare to utter a word. At that moment, I raised my hands to the sky and thanked God that I had ended the partnership; if I hadn't, I would have been a partner in those insults as well.
Some people stepped in and asked, "What’s going on? There are women and children here."
The man shouted back, "Don't you know this son of a...? Hasn't he cheated you yet?"
They pressured Safar to pay back his debt within a week.
In the midst of this, a compatriot who knew me from the construction days and had previously offered me a job walked into the mall. He said, "How lucky you are to be done with Safar. I told you many times he wasn't a good man, but you didn't listen. Now, listen to me and come work at our company."
I said, "Fine, let's talk."
He was delighted and said, "I'll get back to you tomorrow.
The next day, word came that the CEO of the company **Mandamus** in Husby wanted to speak with me. The CEO was a fellow countryman. We met, and he agreed to a six-month trial period. For me, the only thing that

mattered was being employed, earning an income, and providing for my family.
On my first day, I met my colleagues. The workshop supervisor was a young Swedish man named Pierre. He took me to buy work clothes, and on the way, we discussed my skills. He said, "There isn't a fixed position right now, but an employee is leaving in two months, and you can take his place."
I suggested, "Those two large garages in this area haven't been painted. If you buy the paint, I'll do it." He agreed, and I began painting. Gradually, I started getting to know the local residents.
The company managed a complex of about a thousand apartments, and we were responsible for their maintenance. The buildings were divided into four zones, with each of us overseeing 250 units. During the first six months, my salary was covered by the **Employment Office**; after that, the company would take over.
In a short time, I finished the first large garage. Sometimes, to test my abilities, Pierre would take me into the apartments to show me difficult repair jobs. "Can you handle this?" he would ask. I'd reply, "It's no problem," and fix it right then and there.
Impressed, Pierre told the CEO, "Mansour's skills are high; it's a waste to have him just painting." The CEO responded, "Until he is officially hired, we can't send him into the buildings as lead staff, but he can assist as a helper."
I moved on to the second garage, occasionally working inside the buildings with the supervisor or doing repairs in vacant apartments.
One day, the countryman who had helped get me the job said, "One of the tenants is struggling financially and needs a small TV. If you see one while clearing out the trash rooms, let me know."
"Sure," I said. That very day, I found a small television and put it in storage to tell him about it the next morning.
The next day when I arrived at work, a Swedish colleague said, "That guy took the TV you set aside and moved it to the basement of another building."
I replied, "Well, the TV was for him anyway.

When I went to the basement and opened the small room with my key, I saw that he had left the TV plugged in to see if it worked, but it was broken. On my way back, I ran into him; he realized I knew he had taken it. "The TV doesn't work," he said.
"Which TV?" I asked.
"The one from the storage," he replied.
"How did you know it was mine?" I questioned.
"Well, what difference does it make?" he muttered.
"None," I said, "don't worry about it."
"So, where should I put it?" he asked.
I replied, "I already told you it wasn't mine, so I have no idea where you should put it!"
I didn't appreciate his behavior.
A while later, a younger colleague who wanted to continue his studies finished his term. The workshop supervisor asked the CEO to hire me as his replacement. The CEO agreed, and we settled on a salary. I told him, "Since you are Iranian and running this company, I will do my best to **uphold your reputation** and provide the best service to the tenants."
That same day, I told him, "From now on, I am responsible for my own work, and I no longer want the compatriot who vouched for me to remain my guarantor."
"Did something happen?" he asked.
"No," I replied, "I just want to be **independent**."
I was deeply grateful to him for the introduction, but it was time to stand on my own. The supervisor handed over my designated area, and for a while, I helped him clear the **backlog** of pending tasks. Days began to pass smoothly, and life slowly returned to a **normal routine**. Work orders would arrive by fax; as soon as I received them, I would call the tenant and schedule an appointment to get the job done.
Some of my colleagues would just sit in the storage room or go home instead of attending to the tenants' needs. They would even complain to me for finishing my tasks too quickly, saying, "By working like this, you are devaluing our labor."
One of them would take a work order from the fax, put it in his pocket, and ignore it. Then, he would falsely write on

the form that the job was done or that he had called multiple times with no response—even though the repair was never made and the tenant was left in the dark.
The company policy required us to call a tenant three times, and if there was no answer, to visit the apartment. If no one opened the door, we had to leave a note stating they needed to call back to reschedule. I, however, followed my own principles; I never returned a work order to the office without completing the job. I would persistently call and leave messages until a meeting was set and the repair was finished. I knew that leaving things undone only added to my future workload, so it was better to clear the **backlog** immediately. This approach kept both the tenants and the property management company satisfied.
At that time, most of the tenants were foreigners. There were a few Swedes, about thirty percent were Iranians (or Persian speakers), and the rest were from Arab countries, Pakistan, and elsewhere. I truly enjoyed my environment—not just the work itself, but the **cultural diversity** and the chance to connect with people from all over the world. This experience was invaluable.
Every day, I interacted with at least eight to ten tenants. Often, I would do extra favors for them that weren't part of my official duties, like installing chandeliers or assembling furniture they had bought but couldn't put together themselves. I did these tasks for free for many of them. Because of this, the tenants began to see me as a member of their own families and slowly started sharing their life struggles with me. In turn, I shared my own experiences with them. Whenever I went to the trash collection area, if I found a functional appliance, I would take it, repair it in my spare time, and give it to those in **financial hardship**. I also rescued expensive children’s toys, cleaned them up, and gifted them to families with kids. Seeing their joy brought me a deep sense of fulfillment.
Many tenants were looking for smaller or larger apartments. I would take their numbers and introduce them to one another so they could swap their units. I never accepted a dime for this service, even though they were often eager to pay me.

It pained me whenever someone asked for financial help and I couldn't provide it. Eventually, I started a private **interest-free loan fund** for myself, setting aside 1,000 kronor from my own salary every month to lend to those in temporary need. This fund eventually grew to 10,000 kronor.

I'll never forget going to a compatriot's home for a repair. When she opened the door, she looked devastated. 'Are you okay? Is something wrong?' I asked. She replied, 'I've separated from my husband and I'm in a **financial bind**. I had to pawn my wedding jewelry at the bank.' I asked, 'If that solved the problem, why are you still upset?' She explained, 'The jewelry is worth more than double the loan they gave me. If I can't pay it back on time, they'll auction it off for a fraction of its value, and I might even end up still owing them money.' I asked how much she needed to get it back. '8,000 kronor,' she said. I asked, 'If I lend you this, how long will it take to repay?' Overjoyed, she said, 'Two months.' I replied, 'You might not be able to manage that; if you pay me back 1,000 kronor a month, I'll be satisfied.' She couldn't believe it and was incredibly happy. The next day, I gave her the money. She retrieved her jewelry and insisted, 'I'll leave this with you as **collateral** until I pay you back.' I refused and told her, 'No need, keep it yourself.' We agreed on the monthly installments.

However, she was never on time with her payments. Each time she handed over a monthly installment, I felt a sense of unease. Around that same time, I went to do a job at the home of a tenant from Latin America. He was in a bad way. He said his **government subsidy** hadn't arrived, and he couldn't pay last month's rent. The company had issued an eviction warning. The debt was 4,800 kronor. I told him, 'Don't worry, I'll bring the money right now.' I returned with 5,000 kronor and gave it to him. He said, 'I asked my father, my mother, and my brother for this loan, and none of them would help me. You, a stranger, gave me this money with no **guarantees**.' He hugged me and thanked me profusely.

A few days later, when I needed to go to his house for a repair, I decided not to call beforehand. I was afraid he might think I was calling to **press him for the money**.

However, the next day, the company receptionist called and told me the tenant had reached out, saying he would be home all day.
When I arrived, he said, 'Since my situation is sorted out, I've come to pay you back.' He had placed the money in an envelope, along with a bottle of red wine. I told him, 'There was no rush for the money.' He replied, 'I know, but I no longer need it either.'
I felt a deep sense of **personal fulfillment** for what I had done, and I was genuinely happy.

Helping Tenants and Evading Traps

"A few elderly Swedish women were also among our tenants. I'll never forget calling one of them to ask, 'If you're home, may I come over to finish the repair?' She replied, 'Come if you want, but I'm not properly dressed.' At first, I thought she was joking. I went and rang her doorbell. I heard her say, 'Come in, the door is open.'
To my absolute shock, I found her standing naked in the middle of the hallway. She was very old, and it was clearly difficult for her to dress herself. I helped her put on one of her loose gowns. Then, I repaired the kitchen faucet. As I was leaving, she asked me to help her take the gown off again because she couldn't sleep with it on. I assisted her and asked, 'Don't you have anyone to help you?' She said, 'Yes, my grandson helps me.' I clarified, 'I mean government assistance.' She replied, 'My grandson receives money from the state for the care he provides me.'
I helped her to her bedroom. There was a rug there so thick with dust that you couldn't even see its pattern; it hadn't been vacuumed in ages. I found her vacuum cleaner in storage, but it was loud and had no suction. I took it apart, cleaned it, and vacuumed the rug until it was spotless. Before leaving for my next appointment, I wrote my number in her notebook and told her, 'If you ever have an emergency, call me, and I'll come help you.'

Similar situations occurred once or twice a week. On another occasion, a tenant mentioned wanting to buy a ceiling fan but didn't know how to install it, asking if I could help. I said, 'If I have time, I'll come by.'

Some time passed, and one day my phone rang. 'Hello?' I said. A voice replied, 'Hi, I'm the one who asked for help with the fan. I've bought it; can you come today?' Since it was summer and many tenants were away on vacation, I wasn't very busy. I said, 'Yes, I'll be there at one o'clock.'

It was a scorching hot day. I went and knocked on the door. It opened, and her daughter—about fifteen or sixteen years old—stood there smiling at me. She was wearing a very short skirt and a corset, appearing as if she had just stepped out of the shower. I said, 'I'm here to install the fan.' She took my hand and said, 'Come in.' I assumed her parents were home. I took off my shoes and entered. Looking around for them, I asked, 'Where is your mother?' She gave me a **sly smile** and said, 'They aren't here.' I replied, 'But your mother just called me.' She laughed and said, 'No, that was me.'

I said to myself, 'Good heavens, it seems I've fallen into the devil's trap today!' She asked me to follow her into the bedroom to install the fan. As I followed, I realized she had set a stage for me. Fragrant incense was burning over a candle, scenting the room. A mattress was spread on the floor, and a framed photo of her with a young man sat atop the television. I asked, 'Is the person in the photo your brother?' 'No,' she replied, 'that's my boyfriend.' I felt a wave of relief, thinking her intentions might not be as malicious as I feared.

I asked where the fans were. 'In my brother's room,' she said. We went there, and as I started opening one of the boxes, I asked if she had a ladder. She brought a small one but insisted, 'You must install the fan in my room first.' I told her it made no difference since I had to do both, but she pleaded, 'Please, mine first.' I agreed and carried the box to her room.

Under the guise of 'helping,' she kept pressing herself against me. I set up the ladder and climbed up to mark the ceiling. Suddenly, she grabbed my legs from behind. 'What are you doing?' I asked. 'I want to hold you so you don't

fall,' she said. 'It’s not necessary, please step aside,' I told her. She moved away. As I was drilling into the ceiling, she grabbed my legs again and eventually tried to embrace them. I gave her a stern warning, and she finally let go. She then lay on the mattress, making provocative gestures. I stayed on the ladder, my back to her, and continued the installation.

After finishing her room, I packed my tools and moved to her brother's room. As I climbed the ladder again, she approached me once more. I was genuinely afraid I might lose my self-control. 'When will your parents be back?' I asked. 'My father is away on a trip, my brother is studying in another city, and my mother won't be back until five,' she said with a smile. 'Don't worry, it's just the two of us.'

When she said that, I knew I was facing a **severe trial**. I said angrily, 'Please leave the room, or you will regret it.' She laughed and asked, 'What do you mean?' I replied, 'It means I’ll pack my things and leave right now.' She looked at me with a dejected expression, and I repeated, 'Did you hear me or not?' She sullenly said, 'Yes,' and went to the living room.

I hurriedly installed the second fan and fled the house. She was deeply offended by my rejection. Sometime later, she actually came to our company and applied for an internship.

Situations like this happened quite often. Many tenants were lonely and simply wanted someone to talk to. Some were women who wore full traditional veils, and only their closest male relatives were allowed to see their faces. Doing repairs in their homes often took a long time because whenever I called, they would say, 'My husband isn't home.' We had to coordinate with the husbands. This was one of the reasons my Swedish colleagues struggled with these apartments. However, once the husbands got to know and trust me, they told their wives to open the door whenever I called.

Eventually, tenants began calling the company specifically requesting me for their repairs. Many would even ask when I was going on vacation so they wouldn't call for home repairs while I was away; they preferred to wait for my return. This led to a significant decrease in direct visits to the company office, as many reached out to me directly—

especially those who struggled with the Swedish language and sought my help.
The company office called me repeatedly to translate for our compatriots. As a result, fewer people sought out the CEO, and he began to feel that his influence was waning while mine was growing. Although he was satisfied with my performance, he grew **envious** and resentful of the standing I had gained among the tenants.
When I visited their homes, I would go beyond my official duties; if they had other requests I could fulfill, I would help —whether it was translating letters, repairing personal items, or offering advice on family and financial matters. This led people to believe my wife was an incredibly lucky woman. I lost count of how many times people told me, 'Your wife is so fortunate to have you,' or 'You are a gem, a heart of gold.' Everyone likened me to whatever they valued most, and some even **envied my life**. Our family friends would say the same to my wife: 'How lucky you are to have such a wonderful husband.'
However, these compliments didn't mean that she was a difficult person or that I was uniquely 'good.' My wife never complained. Not once did she pressure me to buy a house, a new car, or even ask to go to the cinema. She was a woman of **extraordinary patience** and few words.

A Health Crisis and Whispers of Corruption

"One early morning, my wife woke me up. When I opened my eyes and saw her face, I was in total shock; half of her face was drooping, one eye wouldn't close, and she had lost control over half of her body. 'What happened?' I asked. She replied, 'I took the kids to preschool this morning, and the teacher asked me, "Haven't you looked in the mirror?" I said no, why? She told me I needed to get to a hospital immediately.'
We dressed hurriedly and took a taxi to the emergency room. After several tests, the doctor said, 'If you had

arrived two hours later, there would have been permanent brain damage, and she would have lost her hearing, sight, and motor control for the rest of her life.' I asked, 'Did she have a stroke?' He replied, 'No, but the symptoms are similar. An infection in her ear caused a blockage in a vein.' They covered her eye with special glasses and prescribed medication to protect it from drying out and light sensitivity.

For a while, she couldn't control half of her body and needed my help with every daily task, from bathing to using the restroom.

Despite these new challenges at home, I pushed forward with my work. One day, a tenant mentioned, 'I heard your CEO is taking **under-the-table payments** to jump people ahead of the housing queue.' At first, I didn't believe it and dismissed it as a mere rumor.

However, several others soon said the same thing. One morning, on my way to the workshop, a woman with two children approached me. 'Are you Mansour?' she asked. When I confirmed, she began to cry, explaining she was homeless and struggling with her two kids. I told her, 'I don't control the housing; you must register with the company and wait your turn. Perhaps if you get a doctor's note, they might prioritize you.'

The next day, she saw me and wept again. 'I lived in another city. My husband was a political activist who was always traveling to Iraq; we separated, and he just left the children and vanished. I'm staying in a friend's tiny apartment, and life is unbearable.'

I told her, 'Instead of crying to me, go see the CEO; perhaps he'll have a change of heart and help you.' She went and made an appointment. A few days later, I saw her again, beaming with joy. 'The CEO promised me a two-bedroom apartment by the end of the month!' she said. I replied, 'God bless him, what a **man of conscience** he is!' She agreed, 'Yes, he is wonderful.'

A week later, I called a tenant and we scheduled a visit for two o'clock. When I knocked on the door, I was surprised to see the same woman from before. She happily invited me in. 'Is this your new place?' I asked. 'Yes,' she replied. I felt a surge of pride that our CEO, a fellow Iranian, was looking

out for his compatriots even here in a foreign land. It truly made me proud.
A year passed, and she managed to swap her small apartment for a much larger one. I even helped her settle into the new place. One day, while I was there for some repairs, I noticed a man in the house. She introduced him, saying, 'He is the father of my children. I’m desperately looking for a small apartment for him.' I suggested, 'Well, since you’re on such good terms with the CEO, why not ask him for a place?'
She sighed, 'The problem is, he doesn't have the money.'
'You mean he can't afford the rent?' I asked, confused.
'No,' she replied, 'he doesn't have the money he needs to give to Esmail (the CEO).'
I was stunned. 'Wait, did Esmail take money from you?'
She laughed bitterly, 'Did you really think he gave me this place because of my tears?'
'Are you joking?' I asked. 'Did he explicitly tell you that you had to pay him?'
'Not exactly,' she explained. 'He said the apartment belongs to a tenant who is demanding money to vacate it.'
I countered, 'But as the head of the company, he can’t act as a broker for a tenant! If he finds out a tenant is extorting money to leave, he’s supposed to stop it.'
She looked at me with pity. 'How naive you are! He doesn't lift a finger without getting paid. He even acted like he was doing me a massive favor by securing this place for me.'
'How much did he take?' I whispered.
'Fifty thousand kronor for the first apartment,' she said, 'and another forty thousand to swap it for this larger one.'
'On your children's lives,' I asked, 'are you telling the truth or is this a false accusation?'
'On my children's lives, it's the truth,' she swore. 'Didn't you know?'
'No, I swear to God, I had no idea.'
She laughed again. 'Everyone thinks *you* are his broker—that you find clients for Esmail and take a cut of the commission. That’s why I kept stopping you and crying, begging for a home. When you sent me to him, I assumed Esmail trusted me because of you, which is why he felt comfortable asking for the money.'

I told her, 'One or two people had mentioned before that he takes kickbacks, but when you told me you cried your way into a home, I convinced myself people were just slandering him.'
Once she realized I wasn't an intermediary and was completely in the dark about the bribes, she made me swear not to tell anyone she had paid him. Gradually, I began to hear from others as well: the CEO was taking **under-the-table payments** from applicants, jumping them ahead of the queue, and claiming the money was for 'the previous tenant' to hide his own tracks.
People had heard that the CEO had an intermediary—someone through whom applicants could connect with him. They knew dirty money was changing hands and apartments were being leased outside the legal queue, but they didn't know who the middleman was. Because they knew the CEO was Iranian and I was too, they wrongly assumed I was Esmail’s broker.
Several times, people approached me, asking me to speak with the CEO on their behalf. They would ask, 'How much money do we need to pay to jump the line for a three-bedroom apartment?' The very man I was once proud of because of our shared heritage had now become the source of my deep shame.
I heard he had prioritized several attractive women for housing outside the regular process, and I suspected a portion of the bribes was being funneled to his superiors. Later, I discovered he was taking kickbacks from other businesses as well; for instance, he awarded the area’s cleaning contract to a specific company in exchange for a monthly **under-the-table payment**.
He even gave the painting and wallpapering contracts to someone whose previous experience was in meat distribution and had absolutely no background in painting—simply because he paid for the privilege. He repeated this pattern with all the subsidiary companies. If any of these businesses fell short on their bribe payments, he would strip them of the contract and hand it over to someone else.
The audacity of his greed was staggering. When he was building his own private villa, he traveled to Germany to buy high-end tiles and materials. While a tiny fraction of

these materials was used in a few of our company’s apartments, he charged the entire invoice for his personal home to the company’s account.
He spared no one. He pocketed the illicit gains for himself while the community blamed us for these actions. One of his schemes involved installing electricity meters in all the buildings to charge the tenants separately, even though water and electricity were legally included in the rent. By funneling the tenants' money back into the company’s treasury, he kept the top executives satisfied. In return, they gave him raises and **turned a blind eye** to his blatant misconduct.
Several people told me they had reported his misconduct to the company’s higher-ups, but no action was ever taken. As the saying goes, he was **having his cake and eating it too**. In reality, he was bleeding the tenants dry—it was **modern-day robbery**. Every spare corner or storage space he could find, he would slap a coat of paint on it and rent it out.
One day, he leased out two of the tenants' bicycle storage rooms to two of his compatriots; one became a hair salon and the other a video rental shop. Both owners claimed to be monarchists, yet they couldn't stand each other. One had been a sergeant during the Shah’s era, and the other was a former **SAVAK** (secret police) agent.
The former SAVAK agent would spend his days distributing leaflets for Reza Pahlavi, but by night, he was hosting the Iranian ambassador. The opium pipe was always lit at his home. When Mr. Qashqavi—who happened to be from the same hometown—became the ambassador, this man tried to 'rebrand' his past as a SAVAK agent by becoming an operative for the new regime’s intelligence, the **VAVAK**.
I heard multiple times that the embassy’s car was parked in front of his house. I couldn't tell if these meetings were strictly for smoking opium, gathering intelligence on dissidents, or both. It always begged the question: how is it that many monarchists can participate in protests abroad and yet travel freely to Iran without any issues? Does the Iranian regime not view them as a threat, or are they actually regime operatives embedded everywhere?

Regardless, I knew the 'manqal and vafoor' (opium set) was a permanent fixture at the salon owner's home, but I hadn't realized the Ambassador himself was a fellow smoker.
The second man, the video shop owner, had been an army officer under the Shah and considered himself the official representative of Reza Pahlavi. Of course, among monarchists, this was a common trend—most claimed to represent the Crown Prince while refusing to acknowledge one another. There were countless monarchist groups and factions, all recognizing Reza Pahlavi as the heir to the throne, yet they refused to unite because they were more concerned with **personal status** than the plight of their homeland.
I was oblivious to the conflict between these two shopkeepers. One morning, as I was leaving the company's large warehouse, I noticed his shop was open. He was sitting on the floor, his head buried in his hands. Surprised, I approached him and asked, 'What's wrong?' This man, who always spoke with a tough, **street-wise tone**, now spoke through tears. He said his shop had been robbed, and everything was gone.
A strange feeling came over me; I was deeply moved seeing a man of his age feeling so utterly hollow, as if his life had reached its end. He lamented that most of the stock belonged to others, and he hadn't even paid for it yet. Suddenly, the distance I had always kept from him vanished. I forgot why I used to avoid him. I told him, 'Don't worry, I'll help you.'
From that day on, I helped him restock and rebuild the interior of his shop. I assisted him so much that the neighbor began to complain. The shop owner had told me he suspected the neighbor was behind the theft, saying, 'He wants me out so he can rent this space from the company and own the whole area.' One day, I said loudly enough for the neighbor to hear, 'From today on, I am by your side. You can count on me.'
I truly did everything in my power for him; even during my off-hours, I would go to his shop and help him sell merchandise, even though before the robbery, I wouldn't have even walked in his direction. He often remarked, 'I'm glad my shop was robbed because it led me to meet you.'

Through this period, I also became acquainted with his family. One day at the shop, he asked me to step into the small back room, his resting area, to meet his nephew who had come from another city. I went inside and saw a young man sitting there. He stood up, greeted me warmly, and introduced himself: 'My name is Shahin. The owner of this video store is my uncle...'

Later, I discovered he didn't have a residency permit and wasn't actually the shop owner's nephew. Instead, there was an old connection between his father and the owner. At his father's request, he had called the shop owner from the city where he was staying, pouring his heart out. He told him that his uncle-in-law was **exploiting** him and preventing him from getting his residency; he had forced him to work in a pizzeria and was pocketing all his wages himself.

The video shop owner had told him, 'Come to Stockholm, and I'll handle your residency. Since I am a representative of Reza Pahlavi, I can get a letter from him and sort out your papers.'

Believing him, Shahin packed his things and moved to Stockholm. He didn't even tell me that he had handed over the money he'd secretly saved from his uncle-in-law to the shop owner. He remained silent because Ali Agha (the shop owner) had warned him not to discuss his lack of a residency permit with anyone—not even me.

The next day, he started working at the shop and began making friends. Ali Agha rented a room for him, but a month or two later, conflict broke out between them. Ali Agha had instructed the landlord to take the room back, a cold tactic to make the young man more **subservient** and dependent on him.

One day, I saw Shahin completely distraught and hopeless. I confronted Ali Agha: 'What on earth are you doing to him?' Ali Agha replied dismissively, 'You're my friend, so just stay out of it.' I snapped back, 'What do you mean stay out of it? Why did you tell the landlord to kick him out?' He lied, 'I didn't; the landlord just wanted his room back.'

I turned to Shahin and asked, 'How much longer can you stay there?'

'Two weeks,' he replied.
'Don't worry,' I said. 'God is great; I'll fix this.'
Ali Agha was resentful of my interference, but since he needed my help, he couldn't push me too far. He knew my character—he knew I follow no one's orders and only listen to my own **conscience**.
The next day, I told Shahin, 'I've found a small place for you. Grab your things and come here; the rent isn't much.' He said he had no way to move his belongings. Using the company's moped, despite its limited space, I helped him transport his things to the new house. Ali Agha realized then that he couldn't just treat the boy however he pleased. Just as I had supported Ali Agha during his hard times, I was now the **protector** of this lonely young man in a foreign land.
For a few months, I only charged him half the rent. Eventually, a friend of his from his previous city moved to Stockholm and became his roommate, and they split the rent between them.
But then Shahin told me, 'My roommate stole my bicycle and moved out.' Despite the previous drama, his relationship with Ali Agha had improved again. They had apparently settled on a wage, but he was still obsessed with his residency papers. Ali Agha kept feeding him **empty promises**. I had previously secured official endorsements from Mr. Banisadr for several refugees and could have done the same for him, but he was still pinning his hopes on Ali Agha's illusions.
One day, he said to me, 'I've found someone who can solve my residency problem.'
'How?' I asked.
'It's easy,' he replied. 'He takes money and fixes residency for any country you want.'
'Are you joking?' I said.
'No, I'm not. He has helped many people, and he even speaks on a local radio station about refugee issues.'
I countered, 'It's impossible for someone in Sweden to do such a thing. I've heard that Swedish embassies in Iran and Turkey sell visas, but I've never heard of anyone inside Sweden being able to arrange residency illegally.'

I didn't take him seriously at first, but later, I heard the same story from several others. A hairdresser with three children also spoke very highly of this person. 'What's his name?' I asked. 'Dr. Majid Sadeghi,' she replied.
It turned out he was the same person Shahin was pinning his hopes on. Apparently, many desperate refugees had put their trust in him. He was reportedly charging each asylum seeker between **100,000 and 150,000 kronor**. I asked Shahin, 'Have you paid him yet?'
'No,' he said, 'but I and two others are supposed to give him the money in the next few days.'
'Wait a bit,' I told him, 'let me do some research on him first.' Shahin was in a rush and urged me to hurry.
I visited the hairdresser. She also intended to contact Dr. Majid Sadeghi to handle her and her children's residency. I told her, 'If you trust me, wait a little while until I investigate.' She agreed.
I then contacted a refugee whose brother had been deceived by 'the Doctor.' The brother had even given his mobile phone to Majid Sadeghi and become his assistant, hoping his case would be prioritized. I told him, 'Since you trust him so much, just wait. Once you see him successfully secure residency for someone, then you can truly rely on him.'
He replied with total confidence, 'He already fixed the case for one refugee who is also his friend. That person called the same local radio station where Dr. Majid speaks and thanked him for his efforts.'
I realized the situation had become very serious. This 'Dr. Majid Sadeghi' had become like a virus preying on defenseless refugees.
There were also two political organizations in the same area that claimed to help refugees. They received government funding in the name of refugees but spent the money on their own organizations, doing nothing for the asylum seekers unless they were members. Because many refugees didn't trust these organizations, they turned to Dr. Majid Sadeghi in desperation. They believed that because he spoke from an official platform like the radio, he must have a working relationship with the **Swedish Migration Agency**.

I asked him to introduce me to Dr. Majid Sadeghi, pretending that I also wanted to bring a relative from Iran to Sweden. He agreed and called Sadeghi, then handed me his phone number with his consent.
Since I saw that Shahin and the hairdresser were in a desperate rush, I immediately called Majid Sadeghi and invited him to my home to talk. He accepted and came over. After the initial greetings, I told him, 'I've heard so much about you; everyone is talking about your work.'
I led him to the kitchen, and we sat around the table. I had already turned on a digital recorder (MP3)
and **concealed** it under the table. After pouring tea for both of us, I began: 'I want to bring my nephew from Iran to Sweden. What needs to be done?'
'No problem,' he replied confidently, 'I'll handle it.'
I said, 'That's why I asked you here. Obviously, every service has a cost. I need to see if my nephew can afford it.'
He played the part of a philanthropist, saying, 'It's nothing. I'm willing to do this for you for free.'
I replied, 'I appreciate your humanity; you have a big heart. But I don't want you to lose money. As long as he arrives here safely, that's enough.'
He insisted again that it was no trouble. I countered, 'Don't be modest. I know the money we give you doesn't all stay in your pocket. You have to give a large portion of it to people at the **Swedish Embassy in Turkey**, as well as others who run migration offices there.'
Once he realized I 'understood' how the system supposedly worked, he dropped the act. 'Since you know I have to pay others as well,' he said, 'for you, with a special discount, it will be **one hundred thousand kronor**.'
'Now we're talking,' I said.
At that moment, his phone rang. He picked it up and answered, 'Majid Sadeghi speaking...
The phone's volume was high. I could hear a woman—whose voice sounded remarkably like the hairdresser I had told to wait—speaking to him with great deference. She was pleading for an appointment to consult him about her asylum case. Dr. Majid gave her a time, and they hung up.
I asked Mr. Sadeghi, 'So, what should my nephew do, and how do we handle the payment?'

He replied, 'It’s simple. Have him make three photocopies of his ID. One for me, one for the Swedish Embassy in Turkey at an address I’ll provide, and one for my contact at the **UNHCR** office. Once half the money is paid, I’ll make the calls, and they’ll start working on the file.'
I thanked him, poured him another tea, and began to 'advise' him. I said, 'Aren’t you afraid someone might record these conversations and hand them over to the Swedish police?'
He shrugged, 'I’m not doing anything illegal, so why should I be afraid?'
'Isn't bribing a UN representative or a Swedish diplomat illegal?' I countered.
'Well, you have a point,' he admitted.
I said, 'Just watch your back; there are many spiteful and envious people out there. I wouldn't want any trouble for you.'
Once he felt he could trust me, I asked, 'Why did you leave Iran?'
He began his **elaborate backstory**: 'I was the leader of a student organization and spent time in prison. After my release, I continued my activism. One day, I saw the Revolutionary Guards surrounding my house. I was on the run in different cities until I heard that if caught, I’d likely face the death penalty.'
'What was your profession?' I asked.
'I am a specialized physician,' he claimed, 'and I was also active in the Iranian regime’s **nuclear program**. Because of that, my stay in Turkey was deemed too dangerous by the UN, so they fast-tracked my residency and sent me to Sweden.'
He then asked, 'Do you also engage in political activities?'
'Yes,' I replied.
'With which organization?'
'With Mr. Banisadr and a group of Iranians collaborating with him.'
'How wonderful,' he said, 'I’ve heard great things about him...'
I thanked him for coming over. He said his goodbyes and left.

He sensed that I didn't take his stories seriously and that I was suspicious of him. A couple of hours after he left, he called me, sounding panicked. 'The Revolutionary Guards have raided my father's house and arrested him!' he claimed. He clearly expected me to report this to Mr. Banisadr so his office could leak the news of the arrest to the media.

I replied calmly, 'Don't go to the media just yet; it might put your father's life in danger. Maybe they just want to ask him a few questions and will release him soon. Wait until tomorrow. If they don't let him go, use those high-level contacts you have at the UN and with the foreign diplomats. Once it hits the news, even they might not be able to help.'

My response **thwarted his plan**. He was forced to thank me and said, 'Yes, you're right. It's better if I pursue it through my own channels.' The next day, he called back claiming he had successfully managed to get his father released.

I told Shahin bluntly, 'This man is a fraud.' But Shahin still wouldn't believe it. I said, 'We need to set a trap for him and see what documents he's actually carrying in that briefcase of his.'

'What should we do?' Shahin asked.

I explained the plan: 'Invite him to your place one day. I'll come over with the kids. I'll keep him busy talking. You have a friend call him and say he's down in the parking lot and needs to speak with him and show him some documents.' Shahin agreed.

The day came. I was at Shahin's place, deep in conversation with the long-haired 'Dr. Majid Sadeghi' about Shahin's asylum case, when his phone rang. He picked up and said, 'I'll be right down.' He turned to Shahin and said, 'I'm supposed to meet someone in the parking lot below your building.'

Shahin said, 'I'll come down with you.'

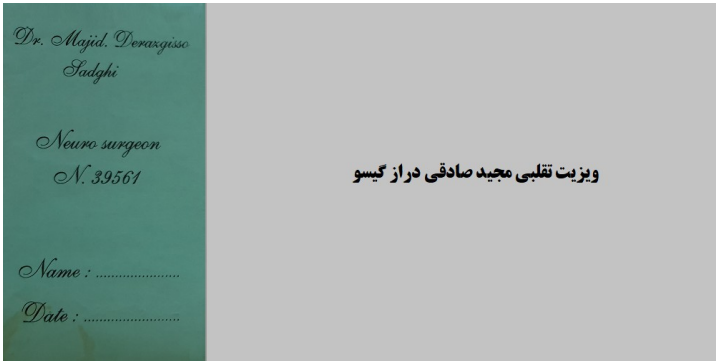
As the 'Doctor' stood up and reached for the handle of his briefcase, I looked at him and said:

'Well, Doctor! Don't you trust us? You're not taking that with you, are you?'

Feeling pressured to show he trusted us, he was forced to leave the briefcase behind and went down to the parking lot with Shahin.
I told one of the children, 'Go and hold the elevator door so it stays on this floor and no one can use it.'
He went and kept the door open, giving me the chance to quickly search through 'Dr.' Majid Sadeghi's briefcase.
Inside, I found:

- A stack of **prescription pads** in his own name.
- Several stamps and documents bearing the seal of a **student organization** of which he was the head—an organization no one had ever heard of until that day.
- A thick bundle of **500-kronor bills**, which I suspected he had swindled from some poor, desperate refugee.

I tore off a few sheets from his medical prescription pads and tucked them away. Just as I finished, the elevator door closed and they came back up. I acted as if nothing had happened and continued our conversation.
When he finally left, I turned to Shahin and showed him the prescription sheets. I said, 'Look at this! If he were a real doctor in Sweden, he wouldn't be carrying around these **fake-looking pads**. And look at these stamps for an organization that doesn't exist. He's building a **paper empire** to trick people like you.'
Shahin was stunned. The reality of the **scam** was finally starting to sink in.



I also took a document belonging to the student organization he had fabricated. I counted the money—it was twenty brand-new 500-kronor bills. Since I didn't know who they were stolen from, I placed them back in his briefcase. I opened the door and told the child holding the elevator, 'You can let go now, come inside.'

We waited until Shahin and Mr. Sadeghi returned. 'I'm in a rush, I have to go,' Sadeghi said. He tucked the paper he was holding into his bag and said his goodbyes. As soon as he left, I turned to Shahin: 'I had my doubts before, but now I am certain he is a fraud.' I urged him to get his original documents back.

'I don't know how,' Shahin said, looking overwhelmed.

'Tell him you need them to make copies since you gave him the originals,' I suggested. 'I'll come with you.'

Shahin then mentioned, 'One of my friends, Peyman, is supposed to give him 50,000 kronor tomorrow.'

'Tell him to get his documents back before it's too late,' I warned.

Shahin called Majid Sadeghi. On our way to the house where Sadeghi was temporarily staying, we ran into Peyman, Mohsen, and his brother. I spoke with them too, but they refused to believe the 'Doctor' was a con artist.

I asked Mohsen, 'What about that friend you said got residency through him?'

'He hasn't actually received it yet,' Mohsen admitted.

'Then what was that radio call all about?' I asked. 'The one where he thanked him?'

Mohsen explained, 'Majid Sadeghi showed him a list with over twenty names. There were four stars next to my friend’s name. Sadeghi told him: "This means you are 100% guaranteed to get residency. Now go and buy everyone sweets to celebrate."'

Apparently, the other names on the list had between one and three stars. Sadeghi had told Mohsen, 'You are a three-star candidate. You need to deposit money into a bank account in Canada to fix your residency so you can go there.'

'What did you do?' I asked. 'Did you pay him?'

'Yesterday, we went to the bank together,' Mohsen said. 'He told me: "Stay here in front of the bank while I go in to get

the payment receipt." He came out with a receipt for 50,000 kronor.'
'Did you actually pay it?'
'I told him I didn't have the cash on me. He said: "I'll pay it from my own account for now; you just bring it to me tomorrow." I agreed.'
'My god,' I said, 'can't you see? He's a **professional swindler**.
Mohsen argued, 'No way, what are you talking about? I saw the payment slip with my own eyes.'
I asked, 'You weren't inside the bank, so how do you know he actually paid?'
'He showed me the slip himself,' he insisted.
I countered, 'That means nothing. Those slips are available at every bank counter. Anyone can pick one up and write any amount they want on it. What matters is the official receipt.'
'Did he show you the receipt?' I pressed.
'He kept the receipt for himself,' Mohsen muttered.
Later, Mohsen confessed that he was even planning to transfer his brother's Mercedes-Benz into the 'Doctor's' name to cover the rest of the debt.
I turned to Peyman, 'What about you? Have you handed over any money?'
'I've sold everything I own,' he said, 'and I'm about to give it all to him.'
'On what basis do you trust him so much?' I asked.
'His work is legal,' Peyman replied confidently.
'What do you mean by legal?'
'We went to the **Migration Agency** together,' he explained. 'He went inside and brought out a form. He filled in all my details and took it back in so they would process my case out of turn.'
I said, 'You didn't follow him inside. How do you know he actually handed that form to anyone? He could have just walked in, tucked the form in his pocket, and walked right back out.'
Peyman paused, looking hesitant. 'You're right. Yeah, that's possible.'
I told them all, 'We are going to get Shahin's file back right now. I suggest you get yours back too, before it's too late.'

We all headed to Mr. Mahmoud’s house. Mahmoud was a taxi driver who had also fallen into Majid Sadeghi’s trap. For some time now, Sadeghi had moved into their home and was living with them, promising to 'fix' the residency papers for Mahmoud’s sister—even though she already had Swedish residency!

The Arrest of the Spy Who Deceived Asylum Seekers

"Wherever you went, people were talking about 'Dr. Majid Sadeghi.' He was known variously as a judge, a surgeon, or a student leader. It wasn't just ordinary people; even political organizations competed to recruit him.
Sadeghi had borrowed several volumes of judicial law books from the Ferdowsi Library. He had a sharp memory and used those books to sound authoritative when answering questions. He even shared a recorded tape of himself insulting the Prophet of Islam, overlaid with the sound of a cheering crowd at the end. He claimed he had delivered this speech to students at Tehran University. He assumed that in exile, an anti-religious sentiment prevailed among the opposition, so he tried to **play both sides of the fence**.
We rang Mahmoud’s doorbell. He opened it and whispered, 'The Doctor is currently doing an interview with a monarchist radio station in the US.' He asked us to enter quietly and wait for the interview to finish.
We sat in the kitchen. Mid-conversation, Majid Sadeghi stumbled in, looking disheveled. He was startled to see me and said, 'I’m in the middle of an interview. I just stepped out during a commercial break to see you. I have to get back.'
I said, 'We won’t trouble you. We just came to get Shahin’s file. We’ll make a few copies and return them to you.' It was clear he just wanted to get rid of us. He went into a storage room but couldn't find the documents. He called out to

Shahin, 'Come find it yourself, I have to finish my broadcast.'
Shahin and I went into the storage area and saw two large boxes overflowing with the files of defenseless refugees scattered on the floor. After digging through the pile, we finally found Shahin’s papers.
As we were leaving, I turned to Mohsen and Peyman and said, 'Go in there and look at your files. You’ll see he hasn't even glanced at them. Take your documents before it’s too late, and if you haven't paid him yet, don’t give him a penny.'
Peyman agreed, 'I’m not giving him any money.' But Mohsen sighed, 'I know he’s lying, yet for some reason, I still want to believe in him!' I replied, 'The choice is yours.'
Shahin and I left the house. I could tell that, deep down, even Shahin wasn't entirely happy with what I had done. I told him, 'We have to do something. These refugee kids are vulnerable, and every **opportunist** is taking advantage of their desperation.'
'What can we do?' he asked.
I said, 'Let’s gather the people you know and brainstorm a way forward together.'
Shahin mentioned, 'There’s a bookstore in Akalla where refugees gather sometimes.'
'Perfect,' I said, 'I'll join you.'
We went there and found several asylum seekers without residency permits sitting together, deep in discussion.
I introduced myself and urged them to form an association so that people like Majid Sadeghi could no longer exploit their vulnerability. After a few meetings, our numbers grew, but the small bookstore couldn't accommodate everyone.
There, I met an asylum seeker named Niko, who identified himself as a communist activist and was trying to secure residency based on his political background. I told him, 'Majid Sadeghi claims to be a doctor with a degree from Tehran University. I have a copy of his diploma, but the photo shows him wearing a tie—and as you know, Iranian universities don't use photos with ties on official degrees.'
'You're right,' he agreed.
I continued, 'I also have his medical license number. Since you were a student, can you verify his credentials with the

university?' He replied, 'I have contacts; I can put in an **official inquiry**.'
Meanwhile, I searched the online database of the Iranian Medical Council using the license number I had for Sadeghi, but no one by that name appeared. A few days later, Niko received the response from the university. He told me, 'The university security office stated that no such student ever existed. The license number actually belongs to a doctor living in Azerbaijan.' We contacted that doctor, and he thanked us for the heads-up.
Next, I reached out to a former leader of the regime's **pressure groups** (plainclothes agents) named Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, who had fled Iran and was living in Turkey. Our associates were trying to get him out of Turkey before the regime could get to him. I asked him if he knew Majid Sadeghi.
I explained, 'There's a man here in Sweden named Majid Sadeghi claiming he fled Iran and spent a short time in Turkey. He says he was fast-tracked to Sweden because he possessed **classified nuclear information**.'
'Do you have a photo?' he asked.
'Yes,' I said, 'one of him in a white lab coat, claiming he was a doctor in Iran.'
'Email it to me,' he replied. I sent the photo immediately. The next day, when I followed up, he said, 'I know him. His name is **Majid Sadeghi Deraz-Gisou**.' (I had already mentioned the name to him).
He continued, 'He spent some time in prison, where he shared a cell with an inmate who actually possessed nuclear information. Deraz-Gisou's own crime involved a **front company** for the Quds Force; he had traveled to Venezuela to purchase computer equipment and submitted invoices for double the actual price. Once the embezzlement was discovered, he was imprisoned.'
Regarding the photo in the white lab coat, he explained, 'That was taken at a laboratory belonging to that same IRGC-affiliated company. Anyone entering that facility is required to wear a white coat.' As for the nuclear expertise, he was blunt: 'He's lying. He knows nothing. Everything he claims about nuclear issues is just information he overheard

from his cellmate and rebranded as his own to **fast-track his asylum**.'

It turned out he had been released from prison on a bond provided by his father-in-law—the Friday Prayer Leader of a city in Mazandaran—and had fled to Turkey without even informing his wife and children. I thanked my contact and thought to myself, 'This fake doctor is quite the **shrewd operator**!'

I asked one of the refugees to invite Ahad, the owner of the local radio station that gave Sadeghi airtime every day, to Shahin's house so we could talk. Ahad agreed and came over. We warned him, 'By giving Majid Sadeghi this platform, you've allowed him to reach and deceive countless vulnerable asylum seekers.'

Ahad dismissed our claims, saying, 'These are just slanders from his rivals.' Even when I showed him the **forged diploma**, he refused to budge, claiming, 'I've read his doctoral dissertation myself.' Nothing we said could convince him. It became clear that only one thing mattered to him: money.

I never expected this from him, especially since I knew his father; we had worked near each other—I was repairing antique furniture while his father was **restoring Persian rugs** in the same shop.

One day, I said to Ahad's father, 'Bravo to your son for raising money on the radio to cover that little girl's surgery in England!' The father smiled and revealed the truth: 'That little girl is actually my niece. My sister called from Iran saying the medical bills were astronomical and begged for help.'

When I told my own children I wanted to donate, my son, Ahad, said, 'No need to spend your own money, I'll handle it.' The next day, he began broadcasting emotional appeals on the radio, asking the public to fund the treatment. He managed to collect enough to cover all the travel, hospital, and surgery costs for his own cousin. He even did a live call with the girl after the surgery. People called in one after another, praising him: 'What a noble man Ahad is!'

No one realized the girl was his own relative. Instead of helping from his own pocket, he settled the entire bill using the public's generosity—and became a hero in the process!

His aunt was thrilled, the donors felt good about their 'charity,' and Ahad remained the beloved benefactor without spending a single krona!
Now, this same Ahad defended the fake doctor, Majid Sadeghi, beyond belief. He would claim, 'People have seen him in surgical scrubs at Uppsala Hospital!' He was telling a half-truth, which is the biggest kind of lie. Before moving to Stockholm, Sadeghi lived in Uppsala. To deceive asylum seekers, he would schedule meetings at the hospital to maintain the **illusion** of being a doctor. He always carried a briefcase containing surgical scrubs and gloves. He would go into the hospital restroom, change into the scrubs, and then walk out to meet his victim. The poor refugee would think he had just stepped out of the operating room to help them. Indeed, 'Dr.' Majid Sadeghi was a true **VAVAK-trained charlatan**.
One day, I said to Mohsen’s brother, 'You mentioned your mobile phone is currently with Majid Sadeghi.'
'Yes, why?' he asked.
'Can you get it back from him?'
'What for? The phone I lent him isn't worth much.'
'It’s worth a lot to me,' I replied. 'Tell him you need it tonight and will return it tomorrow. He only borrowed it, right?'
'Yes, he did.'
'I’m certain he’s using your phone for his illegal activities,' I told him. 'The memory likely contains the contact information of many vulnerable refugees. If we get that phone, we can reach out to them. I’ll give you another phone to hand over to him in exchange for yours.'
He agreed and confronted the fake 'Doctor.' Sadeghi initially resisted, saying, 'I need this phone.' But Mohsen’s brother stood his ground: 'Here’s a phone for you to keep; I need mine back because it’s not mine to lend—I have to return it to the owner.'
Sadeghi was forced to remove his SIM card and hand over the device.
To our surprise, copies of many numbers and names remained in the phone’s memory. Some names were written in code. The list included political figures, poets, writers, organizations, and defenseless asylum seekers. We

extracted every single number to uncover exactly who this 'Doctor, lawyer, judge, and student leader' had been communicating with.
There was another radio station in Stockholm that broadcast at night—a station known for stirring up controversy, though no one knew where its funding came from. I consulted with the refugee group, and we decided to use this station to **expose the fraud** and prevent more people from falling into his trap. The group spent several days on air revealing the truth.
One day, while I was gathered with several refugees at my home listening to another local station—the one run by Ahad's father-in-law—a caller broke through. 'Majid Sadeghi is in my house right now!' he shouted. 'I've locked him in the kitchen. I'm afraid he'll attack me with a knife!' He pleaded for people to call the police and come to his house, providing his address live on air.
We rushed to the address with the group. A massive crowd had already gathered, and the police had the house surrounded. They arrested him right then and there and took him into custody.
Shortly after, the police raided the taxi driver's house where Majid Sadeghi had archived the asylum seekers' documents in the storage room. They seized all the files and took them to the station. We felt a sense of victory, believing this fraudster had finally been caught.
I went to the police station myself to file a formal complaint against him. I urged the other refugees he had exploited, 'Now is the best time to come forward.' A few did, but many were paralyzed by fear, while others promised to go the following day.
To our utter disbelief, the police released Majid Sadeghi that very same night, along with the documents they had seized, without even glancing at the refugees' files. It became clear to me then that he wasn't just a common con artist; he was **under the protection of the Iranian Embassy** in Sweden.
Suddenly, those who had been silent until then emerged with stories of their own: 'We knew all along he was a spy,' they claimed, though not one of them had dared to speak up before. With Sadeghi back on the streets, the asylum

seekers were no longer safe. He held their entire lives in his files and could hand them over to the embassy at any moment, putting their lives in immediate danger.
Others began to **fish in troubled waters**, exploiting the chaos for their own gain. One such individual was another radio host—formerly a far-left extremist who had once disrupted a Shajarian concert in Stockholm with his thugs, only to later become a lackey for Reza Pahlavi. Ashamed to tell his old friends he had become a monarchist, he called himself a 'constitutionalist.'
He advised the terrified refugees to go into hiding, taking a few to his girlfriend's house for several days. He introduced them to a contact who supposedly helped refugees who 'converted' to Christianity for residency purposes through the church.
Later, an acquaintance who worked at a travel agency and knew of my work with refugees called me. 'Do you know someone named Ali...?' he asked. I said no. He continued, 'He is active with refugees like you; I've heard his voice on Hassan Etemadi's radio station several times.'
'Many people help refugees whom I don't know,' I replied. 'What about it?'
'He flew to Iran today on **Iran Air**,' he revealed.
Stunned, I asked, 'How do you know it's the same man?'
'I called him, and I recognized his voice from the outgoing message on his voicemail. That's why I called you.'
I took the number and compared it with the one I had from the refugees hiding at the radio host's girlfriend's house. It was a match. It was the exact same number.
I was deeply disturbed by such treachery. I told the asylum seeker what I had discovered and asked him to call that number himself. I warned him that if he heard an automated message instead of a person answering, they needed to leave that house immediately. It was no longer a safe haven; their information and addresses could be handed over to the **VAVAK** (Iranian Intelligence).
He was devastated. His entire file—including his conversion to Christianity—was in that man's hands. He couldn't believe it. He dialed the number, heard the voicemail, and gasped, 'We are ruined.' He added, 'That scoundrel told us

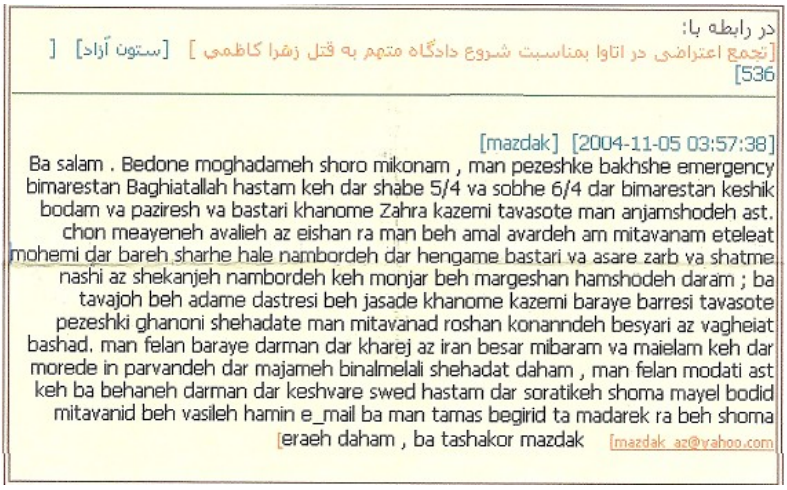
he was a political refugee whose life was in danger and that he could never return to Iran.'
It was unclear what he had done, or would do, with the files of these defenseless refugees and those who had converted. If he handed those documents to the regime, both the refugees here and their families back in Iran would be in mortal danger.
The presence of such individuals meant that for many Iranians, life in Sweden was even more perilous than in Iran. There were mercenaries embedded in both leftist and right-wing groups who claimed to be 'fighters' yet traveled freely to Iran on direct or indirect flights. One day they would shout 'Death to the regime' on the radio, and the next, they would be boarding a plane to Tehran.
There were about ten local radio stations in Stockholm, each receiving government grants under the guise of 'cultural associations.' Their operators spent from dawn to dusk insulting one another. Some also broadcast advertisements, generating **under-the-counter income**.
Many Iranians were 'double pensioners,' collecting retirement checks from both the Iranian and Swedish governments while migrating back and forth between the two countries like seasonal birds. They mocked the genuine refugees who couldn't return to Iran, all while pocketing the benefits intended for those whose lives were truly at risk.
Occasionally, police dogs at the airport would bark loudly at their luggage, signaling the presence of opium. With utter audacity, these individuals would tell the police that the opium was 'medicine' they needed to consume and would demand it back. For a while, the police actually returned it to them. To consume this 'medicine,' they needed a traditional pipe known as a **vafoor**. Since they couldn't find them, they started inventing their own.
Eventually, one 'compatriot' had the idea of importing traditional opium sets and pipes from Iran, labeling them as 'Iranian handicrafts' to smuggle them into Sweden, until the airport police finally caught on to the ruse.

Assisting Refugees in Establishing an Association

During a meeting with the asylum seekers in that small library, I suggested they form an association to solve their problems collectively. I promised to help in any way I could.

They agreed, and we filled out the necessary forms and submitted them for official registration. From then on, we could legally pursue their asylum cases.
My only condition was that the association remain **strictly independent**, unaffiliated with any political group or faction. Our focus was solely on practical issues: finding jobs, housing, and essential supplies.
Once the association was officially registered, we began holding weekly meetings. Our numbers grew, and new faces joined, including a particular couple. From the very first day, looking at the man’s face, I had a gut feeling that he might be a **Pasdar** (Regime Agent). Later, I learned that the verification of Majid Sadeghi's degree from Tehran University had been handled through their contact.
As the membership expanded, I sought a larger venue. I managed to resolve the space issue by moving our meetings from the bookstore to a hall I had access to through my company. Every week, I would prepare the hall and provide tea and sweets. Gradually, the meetings became more organized, and we even brought in psychologists and lawyers to assist the refugees.
One evening, after a late session, that suspicious couple offered to drive me home, saying it was on their way. It crossed my mind that they might be trying to find my address, but I accepted and got into their car.
On the way, I asked, 'Do you have anyone here in Sweden, or are you alone?'
'We have a relative in Finland,' they said. 'We stayed with them for a while, but we didn't like it there. We came to Sweden through an acquaintance we met among the refugees.'
I asked, 'Did you know each other back in Iran?'
'Yes,' the husband replied, 'we were university classmates.'
When I asked about their professions, he said, 'I am a physician, and my wife studied computer science.'
I didn't quite like their vibe and remained curious. That night, they dropped me off, but I made sure to get out a good distance from my house so they wouldn't discover my exact address—though I knew they could easily get it from other refugees if they wanted to.

The following week, while I was preparing the hall, I approached the refugee in charge of the membership registry and asked for the couple's last name. 'I’m a bit suspicious,' I told him.
'Why?' he asked.
'Because I noticed a scar on the husband’s face,' I replied.
He countered, 'It could just be from an accident. Besides, I’m not authorized to share their names with anyone.'
'I’m worried for your safety, not mine,' I said firmly.
He eventually handed me the registry, and I noted down their full names. That same night, I searched the internet, looking for any lead to ensure the other refugees weren't in danger. I stumbled upon a post one of them had published on a website:
'I will start without introduction. I am a physician in the emergency department of **Baqiyatallah Hospital**. I was the one who handled the admission and hospitalization of **Ms. Zahra Kazemi** on the night of June 26th and the morning of June 27th. Since I performed the initial examination, I possess critical information regarding her condition and the visible signs of **beating and torture** that ultimately led to her death. Given the lack of access to the body for an official forensic autopsy, my testimony can shed light on many facts. I am currently outside Iran for medical treatment and am willing to testify before international bodies. I have been in Sweden for some time under the pretext of receiving treatment. If you are interested, please contact me via this email to review the evidence. Sincerely, Mazdak.



در رابطه با:
[تجمع اعتراضی در اتاوا بمناسبت شروع دادگاه متهم به قتل زهرا کاظمی] [ستون آزاد] [536]

[mazdak] [2004-11-05 03:57:38]
Ba salam . Bedone moghadameh shoro mikonam , man pezeshke bakhshe emergency bimarestan Baghiatallah hastam keh dar shabe 5/4 va sobhe 6/4 dar bimarestan keshik bodam va paziresh va bastari khanome Zahra kazemi tavasote man anjamshodeh ast. chon meayeneh avalieh az eishan ra man beh amal avardeh am mitavanam eteleat mohemi dar bareh sharhe hale nambordeh dar hengame bastari va asare zarb va shatme nashi az shekanjeh nambordeh keh monjar beh margeshan hamshodeh daram ; ba tavajoh beh adame dastresi beh jasade khanome kazemi baraye barresi tavasote pezeshki ghanoni shehadate man mitavanad roshan konanndeh besyari az vagheiat bashad. man felan baraye darman dar kharej az iran besar mibaram va maielam keh dar morede in parvandeh dar majameh binalmelali shehadat daham , man felan modati ast keh ba behaneh darman dar keshware swed hastam dar soratikeh shoma mayel bodid mitavanid beh vasileh hamin e_mail ba man tamas begirid ta madarek ra beh shoma eraeh daham , ba tashakor mazdak [mazdak_az@yahoo.com]

I finally understood where my anxiety was coming from. He was no ordinary man; an ordinary person wouldn't be a prison doctor. He had to be part of the regime’s inner circle, someone who had left for a specific reason.
Sometime later, they mentioned needing a computer. I invited them to my home to use mine, wanting more time to understand who they really were.
I asked his wife, 'You mentioned you work in web development; could you build a site for me? I’ll pay whatever the cost.'
'Why not?' she replied.
I then asked, 'Can you show me some of the sites you’ve built so I can see the quality of your work?'
She answered, 'The sites I’ve built are official government portals. I’ve even designed and managed the websites for several high-ranking regime officials.'
That confirmed it; she wasn't an ordinary person either. They had to be in the regime's employ.
The next day, I contacted Mr. Banisadr and recounted the story. I told him that the doctor of **Zahra Kazemi**—the journalist who traveled from Canada to Iran, was arrested, and subsequently killed by Saeid Mortazavi—was now in Sweden. Mr. Banisadr noted that several people had already claimed to be Kazemi’s doctor just to secure

residency. He asked, 'How did you conclude he is the real doctor?'
I replied, 'I know them personally and I’m suspicious. I did some digging and found a post where he was asking a website administrator for help.' I read the text to him. He remarked that the information wasn't new and had already appeared in the parliamentary commission's report, making it accessible to anyone.
A few days later, after the refugee association meeting ended, Niko offered to drive me home. On the way, he asked, 'I heard you invited that refugee couple to your house.'
'Yes,' I said, 'they needed a computer.'
'What kind of people are they?' he probed.
I replied, 'You can't judge people after just one meeting.'
I noticed he was extremely curious, trying to find out what I knew. 'Is something wrong?' I asked.
He said, 'I want to tell you something, but first, you have to promise not to tell anyone. Do you promise?'
I told him firmly, '**If what you’re about to say harms my country or its people, I make no such promise. In fact, I will publish it.**'
'No,' he said, 'it’s about those two—the ones who came to your house.'
'What about them?' I asked.
'They’re upset,' he said. 'They think you’re suspicious of them.'
'So, is that what you wanted to tell me?' I asked.
He sighed, 'But you never gave me your word!'
I simply smiled and stepped out of the car.
The following week, the couple didn't show up for the meeting. Niko started making a scene, shouting that their identities had been compromised and their lives were in danger. In his **theatrics**, he even forgot what he originally wanted to tell me. I asked him, 'What’s with all this drama? Where are they? Why aren't they answering my calls?'
He claimed, 'Their lives are at risk because you discovered who they are and informed Mr. Banisadr. They are now under the protection of the **Swedish Secret Service (SÄPO)** and are living in a safe house.'

I knew he was lying. Mr. Banisadr hadn't told a soul about them. It’s possible the Swedish police had **tapped** my calls with him and briefed the couple themselves. Regardless, they eventually contacted Zahra Kazemi’s family in Canada and moved there with their help, collaborating on the legal case regarding her murder. However, it was Mr. Banisadr’s associates inside Iran who actually gathered and published the evidence of the crime.

After that, Niko focused solely on that specific 'case' and stopped cooperating with the other refugees. The asylum seekers then began broadcasting their struggles through another radio station called *Fanoos*.

A while later, the manager of that station approached me, claiming his car was at the mechanic's and he couldn't afford to get it out. He asked for a 10,000-kronor loan, promising to sell the car and pay me back. I sensed he wasn't being honest, so I told him, 'I only have 5,000 kronor.' He took it and never paid me back. He likely considered it a 'fee' for the airtime the refugees used to share their stories.

Meanwhile, other established refugee organizations did everything they could to **sabotage** our newly formed association.

Then one day, I read in a Swedish newspaper that an Iranian spy, who had been in contact with the Iranian embassy in Sweden, had been arrested. Based on the details provided by the police, I realized it was none other than the 'Doctor,' **Majid Sadeghi Deraz-Gisou**.

This revelation triggered a **re-evaluation** of all the asylum seekers' files who had been in contact with this spy; since their safety was now undeniably at risk, their cases were fast-tracked. The police re-interviewed everyone who had filed a complaint against Majid Sadeghi. In the end, every single one of them who had the courage to step forward and testify was granted **permanent residency**.

I finally felt at peace because our efforts had yielded a tangible result. Once they received their residency papers, the refugees moved on with their lives.
It was ironic to see the reaction of many political figures who had previously criticized me, saying, 'Let it go,

”Sverige vill inte störa Iranhandeln”

Före detta iransk president om Sveriges låga profil i spionaffären

Många invandrarorganisationer har tidigare kritiserat Säpo för att kalla spionage på svenska medborgare för flyktingspionage. Även i fallet med den iranske spionen kallar Säpo, i sitt hemliga dokument, spionens verksamhet för flyktingspionage, något som irriterar svenska iranier.

– Hur länge ska vi kallas flyktingar? Många med invandrarbakgrund som man spionerar på har dessutom inte kommit hit som flyk-

Avslöjad spion kvar i Sverige

Minst tio spioner utvisas varje år

Metro i går.

mig delade med oss av information som han säkert fört vidare till den iranska regimen, säger en iransk

En annan radiostation än den han jobbade vid började misstänka att något inte stämde och skrev till det

uppmuntrar spioner”

överdomstolen ska ha en muntlig förhandling med dem innan ett yttrande går till regeringen.

Säpo har blivit lurat av sina källor tidigare, vad är det som säger att man inte har blivit det den här gången?

gifter om att Säpo har bevisat att han har rapporterat till och tagit emot pengar av personer på den iranska ambassaden. Vad anser du om det?

– Säpos tystnad innebär att man uppmuntrar spioner att verka i Sverige.

”När Säpo vägrar ställa spioner inför rätta ger det en signal om att spioner kan arbeta i Sverige utan att frukta något straff.”

Mehrdad Darvishpour

Metro har träffat spionen. Han tillbakavisar alla anklagelser och säger att Säpo blivit lurade

barn har, enligt honom, fötts missbildade och han säger att det beror på filtren. Han hävdar med bestämdhet att han är läkare men kan inte riktigt redogöra för varför ingen känner till hans läkarexamen i Iran. Han visar upp bilder på sig själv i läkarrock och säger att det är bevis på att han är läkare. Även uppgifterna om att han varit politisk redaktör för en av Irans dagstidningar säger han stämmer fastän ingen på tid-

Mansour; Majid Sadeghi is a nobody, why are you so obsessed with him?' They were the same ones who had once competed to give him a platform, and now they had to face the truth of their own **poor judgment**.

The very people who had once dismissed me, saying, 'Why give him so much importance?', suddenly woke up once the Swedish police officially branded him a **threat to the security** and lives of refugees. Overnight, they were all over the radio, boasting about their own 'struggles' in exposing Majid Sadeghi. Despite everything, Majid Sadeghi continues to live in Sweden, persistent in his deception of defenseless asylum seekers.

Returning to my own work, the company I worked for was led by a CEO notorious for taking bribes from housing applicants. In exchange for these kickbacks, he would jump them ahead of the queue, while those without money were left waiting indefinitely. He also collected **under-the-table payments** from service contractors—cleaning, painting, and flooring companies—to whom our firm awarded contracts. He even made deals with the staff: any savings they could squeeze out of the building maintenance costs would be returned to them as bonuses.
To my astonishment, I saw my own colleagues—many of whom were tenants themselves—suggesting ways to cut costs at the expense of the residents just to secure those bonuses. I, however, did everything in my power to help the tenants. I informed them of their rights and encouraged them to demand the services they were legally entitled to from the company.
For this reason, the CEO despised me. Eventually, the tenants’ voices grew louder. Many began contacting the group's overall chairman, filing complaints and exposing the CEO’s **bribery and systemic corruption**."
Meanwhile, one of our Swedish colleagues, who was in charge of facilities and utility costs, left to become the manager of another branch of the same company. A few months prior, our CEO had assigned a young Swedish man to shadow him, learning the ropes so he could take over the position once the veteran left.

He took over the role, but soon after, several tenants began complaining about poor hot water pressure—a serious issue since hot water in Sweden is a centralized utility. Every time a tenant complained, I would head to the boiler room to check the systems. After confirming the boiler temperature was correct, I'd inspect their apartment to see if the fault lay with the faucet itself.

Since this young man had become the facilities manager, these complaints had spiked. Before him, such issues were rare. When I was certain the boiler and faucets were fine, I'd report back to him. He'd just smile and say, 'Leave the work order on my desk; I'll handle it myself.'

During a weekly staff meeting, he told the CEO, 'This week, several tenants complained about hot water issues that Mansour couldn't fix. He handed them over to me, and I resolved them.'

I interrupted, 'I referred them to you because you're the facilities manager. Now, tell us: what was the problem and how did you fix it?' He just smiled again and said, 'Well, you know...'

'What do you mean "you know"?' I pressed. 'Tell me, so I can fix the defect myself next time.'

He replied, 'Whenever you can't handle it, just let me know, and I'll take care of it.'

I said, 'I'd like to join you next time you do a repair so I can learn.'

'Fine,' he said, but he continued to go alone without informing me. I grew highly **suspicious of his motives**.

One day, I watched him from a distance. I noticed that instead of heading to the maintenance section or inspecting the boiler room, he went straight into a building's basement without even visiting the tenant's apartment. A short while later, he emerged, talking to someone on his mobile phone. He then went to the main office, handed in the completed work order, and returned to his own desk.

Ten minutes later, I walked into his office. 'A tenant had a hot water issue. I left the work order on your desk. Did you see it?'

He smiled and said, 'Yes, I've fixed it.'

I thought to myself, *I need to get to the bottom of this.*

The next day, I went to the office and said, 'The tenant in building 22 complained about the water temperature yesterday. I forgot to note something important on the form.' I asked for the paper, and they handed it to me. I noted the tenant's phone number and called them: 'I'm coming over to fix your hot water problem.'
The tenant replied, 'It's already fixed.'
'Did someone from the company come to your home and repair it?' I asked.
'No,' they said. 'Someone just called and told me they had resolved the pressure issue.' I thanked them.
I realized then that whatever the problem was, it was in the basements, not in the apartments. I went to the basement of that same building to inspect all the **main valves** for hot and cold water. I couldn't reach them easily, but since he was taller, he could open and close them without a ladder.
I brought a small ladder and checked the valves one by one. Everything seemed fine, except for one hot water valve that was **half-closed**. I opened it fully. It became clear to me: whenever he went to 'fix' a leak or a valve, he would intentionally half-close the hot water valve of another building to reduce the pressure and flow.
A few days later, during our meeting, he presented his monthly report. He proudly claimed he had managed to significantly reduce utility costs and 'saved' money so that everyone could receive a **bonus**.
I asked him, 'Can you tell us exactly which costs you cut and how you achieved these savings?'
He replied, 'The hot water costs for this month last year were this much, and under my management this month, they have dropped to this amount. Here is the total saving.'
The other employees applauded him, as they all stood to gain from the **bonuses** his 'savings' would generate.
I pressed further, 'But what exactly did you do? Did you install new equipment?'
He smiled smugly and said, 'That is simply down to my management style.'
I smiled back, but with a different meaning.
From that day on, whenever a tenant complained about water pressure, I would first inspect the **main valves** in the

basement myself before calling the tenant to confirm the issue was resolved.
One day, I walked into the young facilities manager's office. He looked at me with a mocking grin and asked, 'What's up? Do you have another problem?'
'Yes,' I said.
I closed his door and said calmly, 'The tenants and I have a problem, and that problem is you.'
'What do you mean?' he asked, his smile fading.
'I mean, stop creating problems for us. It's fine that you're young and want to **climb the corporate ladder**, but don't do it by tearing things down. To truly progress, you should solve problems, not create them.'
I continued, 'My dear "manager," I'm asking you to stop throttling the water pressure. Stop half-closing the building valves just to save money for a bonus and a promotion. Find a better solution—one that benefits everyone. If you do this again, I will expose you at the next meeting and tell everyone exactly how you've been tampering with the valves. Since you're young and ambitious, you'd better find a way to save money without making life miserable for me and the tenants.'
That was the last time I had such an issue with him. I chose not to report him to the CEO.
Eventually, he suggested to the CEO that they should turn off the radiators in the stairwells to save on heating, and the CEO agreed. Next, they targeted water consumption, signing a contract with a firm that promised to reduce usage for 'free'—on the condition that our company paid them the difference in the water savings for the next three years.
The deal was this: if the water cost in previous years had been one million kronor and it dropped to 600,000, our company would pay that difference of 400,000 kronor to the contractor every year for three years. After that, our company would pocket the 400,000 kronor in annual savings.
Esmail agreed to this. They replaced every faucet head and showerhead, and even installed plastic springs under the toilet flush buttons to cut the water flow prematurely. I started teaching the tenants who complained about the

water pressure how to revert these changes to their original state, though many had already figured out their own workarounds.
Then, under the pretext that 'free' electricity led to waste, Esmail installed individual electric meters in every apartment and began charging the tenants separately—despite the fact that water and electricity were legally included in their rent. The CEO was now double-dipping: collecting full rent while charging extra for electricity, all while lowering the water pressure and the indoor temperature. Tenants were forced to wear winter clothes inside their own homes just to stay warm.
These 'cost-cutting' displays eventually backfired as formal complaints began to pour in. To quiet the more vocal Swedish-speaking tenants, the CEO offered small discounts, but the wave of grievances grew uncontrollable. Consequently, the group's chairman decided to sell off all the apartments in the area to another company, giving them a fresh start to **milk the tenants** through other means. Despite all his 'favors' and the kickbacks he shared with the higher-ups, Esmail ended up unemployed. Many said that these firms never hold onto buildings for more than five years to avoid paying corporate taxes. For five years, they can inflate expenses and claim zero profit to the tax authorities while securing government grants. But after five years, the tax office starts asking: 'Is your company really not turning a profit?' To avoid a full **tax audit**, they simply sell the buildings to another firm and walk away.
The buildings are constantly passed from one hand to another; the company owners avoid taxes and reinvest the resulting profits elsewhere. The apartment complexes in the area where I worked, along with the technical staff, were sold to a new company called **Akelius**.
We were transferred to a firm named **Svefab**, which handled the facilities and maintenance for them. Akelius also began its attempt to **squeeze the tenants**, but when they couldn't extract as much profit as they had expected, they sold the buildings to yet another company called **Wallenstam**, which already owned about five hundred apartments nearby.

This time, however, the deal did not include the staff. Wallenstam outsourced the facilities and maintenance work to a different firm called **Driftia**. Once the buildings were handed over to the new owners, all of us were laid off. We were left with no choice but to start searching for new jobs all over again.

DRIFTIA: THE DAY THEY CAME FOR ME

It wasn't long before two men approached me. "Are you Mansour?" they asked. "Yes, that's me. Why do you ask?" I replied. They introduced themselves: "We're from **Driftia**, and we'd like to have a word with you." I agreed, and we headed to a nearby restaurant to talk.

One of them was **Ricard**, a shareholder in the new company, accompanied by his deputy, **Urban**. They invited me to join their firm and continue my work in the region. My first thought was for my colleagues: "What about the rest of the team?" I asked. Their response was blunt: "We asked your boss which technical staff he'd recommend to stay on with us, and he only gave us your name."

I studied Ricard. Despite being a major shareholder, he didn't carry himself like a typical "big shot." He was **down-to-earth** and **genuine**, just like me. I liked him instantly. I thought to myself, "This guy isn't just in it for the money; he's not a **freeloader**." Even so, I negotiated for a higher salary, and he agreed without hesitation.

Then he offered me the role of Technical Supervisor for the area. I shook my head. "I'm not a desk person," I told him. "Office work is all about making calls and ordering parts. I'm a **hands-on** guy; I want to be where the real work happens."

They asked if I knew someone else for the supervisor role. I recommended **Benny**, a Swedish contractor I knew. Ricard asked me to talk to him, which I did. Benny was **over the moon**—it meant a permanent position with a great salary

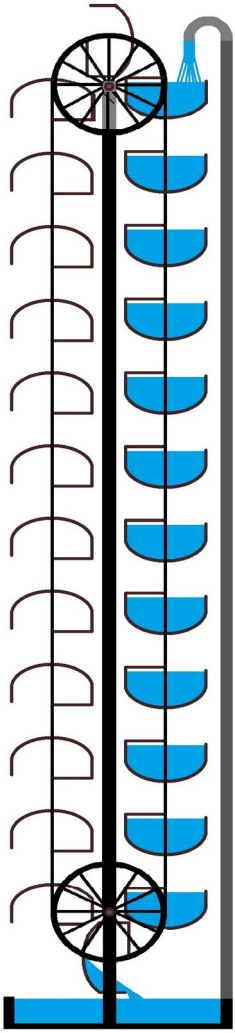
THE SECRET WORKSHOP: INNOVATING BEYOND THE JOB

We got to work. A few days later, they approached me: "We've heard you've set up a small workshop of your own in the area, with some of your own equipment. We'd prefer to have just one central workshop, so we'd like you to move everything over to the main facility."

I was deeply upset. "I've put so much blood, sweat, and tears into that workshop," I told them. "I even pay the rent myself." I insisted they come and see the place before making a final decision. Reluctantly, they agreed. When we arrived, **Ricard**, the shareholder, looked around in surprise. "Your workshop is more organized and cleaner than my own office!" he admitted. Not only did they let me keep it, but they even offered to cover the rent from then on.

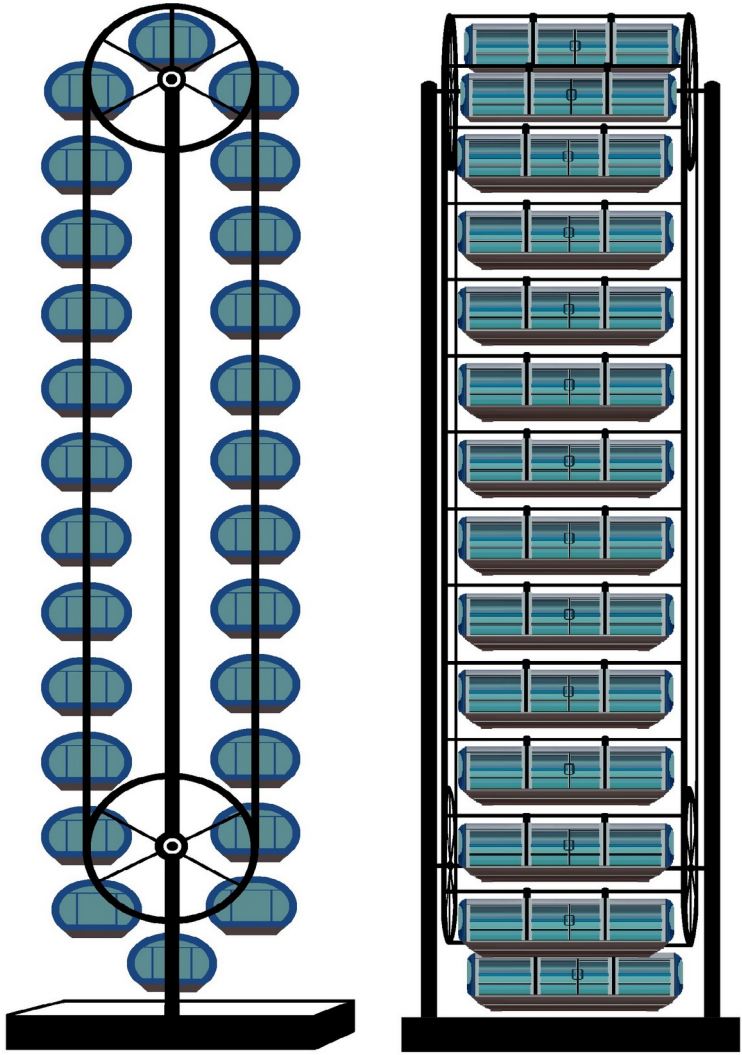
That space was vital to me. Beyond my work with the refugees, I used my downtime to bring my visions to life. I experimented with designs for **wind tunnels** to transport goods between cities and a device for **fuel-free power generation**. I tested the power generator over fifty times with various models. My findings weren't just about electricity; they had potential for **agriculture**, mechanical lifts, and streamlining operations in warehouses and stores. Through these countless experiments, I finally developed a system that could generate several times more power using just a single liter of water. But the impact didn't stop there; the same technology allowed me to yield multiple times the usual harvest from just one square meter of land.

This device proved exceptionally effective for producing fodder and cultivating flowers. The beauty of it was that it didn’t require traditional farmland outside the city. It was compact enough to be used right in a backyard or within indoor facilities. It was a complete shift in how we think about efficiency.

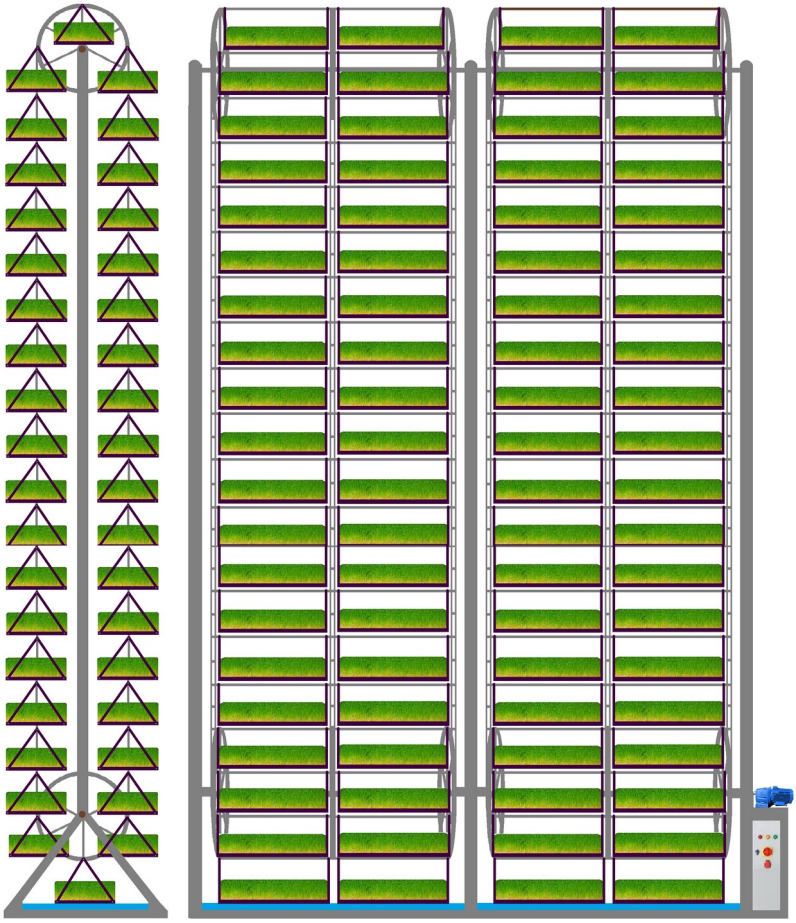


With water pump

Use in waterfall



Ferris wheel and Ferris wheel restaurant



For the production of various vegetables, flowers and...

I was genuinely happy with my work environment and the relationships I had built with both tenants and staff. I went above and beyond to cooperate with everyone and treated the company’s property as if it were my own.
One day, I went to the main warehouse to pick up some supplies. Benny pointed to two large bins and said, "I’ve set these aside to collect old faucets and copper pipes we

replace in the buildings. Bring any scrap copper or old fixtures you have and toss them in here. Once they’re full, I’ll sell them and we’ll split the cash." I asked him about the price, and he replied, "Five kronor per kilo." I agreed to contribute whatever scrap I found.

A few days later, while dropping off some scrap, I noticed several brand-new packs of toilet siphon components sitting in the bins. At first, I thought it was a mistake. I pulled them out and set them on the workbench for Benny to return to the shelves. To my surprise, the next day, the same new packs were back in the scrap bin. I took them to Benny and said, "I don’t know who keeps throwing these away."

"I did," Benny said bluntly. "Why did you take them out?"

"But they’re brand new!" I argued. "There's nothing wrong with them."

He shrugged. "I ordered the wrong size. They’re too short; they won’t fit the toilets."

"If it was a mistake, why not return them?" I asked.

He laughed. "Because in this bin, they’re worth five kronor a kilo to *us*. Why would I send them back?"

I was shocked. "You’ve got to be joking! These cost over a hundred kronor each, and they don't even weigh a kilo combined. Selling them like this is a betrayal of the country."

He didn't say a word, but his look said it all: *"This is my country; what’s it to you?"*

I went back to the warehouse, took two of the units, and installed one in a tenant's bathroom. It worked perfectly. I pulled the rest out of the scrap bin and put them back on the shelf. I told Benny firmly, "I tested one, it works fine, and I’ve put the rest back where they belong.

His face turned beet red, and he snapped at me, "I’m the one calling the shots here!"

"I’m an outsider," I countered. "If I did things like this, people would say I don't care about Sweden because it’s not my country. But you’re Swedish; you should be looking out for your own land. Why would you cause thousands of kronor in damage to your fellow citizens for the sake of five kronor?"

He just laughed. "What’s the big deal? It covers our beer money."

"I don't drink beer," I said firmly. "And even if I did, I'd buy it with my own money, not at the public's expense."
"What do you mean, the public?" he asked.
"Because as costs go up, rents follow," I explained. "It's the tenants who end up footing the bill for this."
Visibly annoyed, he repeated, "It is what it is. Whenever you install something new, the old one goes in the bin. If you ever need anything that isn't in stock, just let me know, and I'll get it for you."
Eventually, he brought two of his relatives into the company, and their **"take-what-you-can"** scheme went into overdrive. He would order supplies in the company's name but install them at private sites completely unrelated to our properties, pocketing the cash. It got to the point where he'd often show up to work drunk. He kept a blanket, a pillow, and several cans of beer in the company van; after lunch, he'd just crawl into the back, drink, and **sleep it off**.
One day, while I was in the main warehouse, I noticed a brand-new faucet—worth nearly two thousand kronor—tossed into the scrap bin. I inspected it and realized they had stripped a small twenty-kronor part from it and dumped the rest. I took the faucet back to my workshop to keep for a tenant who might need a replacement.
After lunch, Benny asked, "There was a faucet in the bin, but it's gone. Where is it?"
"I took it to use," I replied. "I put two old ones in its place for you to sell. You can keep the money."
He was furious but stayed silent. It was clear: he wanted me gone so he and his relatives could loot the company's supplies in peace.

A MIRACLE AFTER 18 YEARS: THE JOY AND THE UNTHINKABLE

One day, my wife told me, "I had some abdominal pain two days ago. I went to the doctor, and they prescribed antibiotics." That same afternoon, she had an appointment with her gynecologist. She mentioned the pain and the antibiotics to him. The doctor looked at her and asked, "Is it possible you're pregnant? Let’s run a test."

After the test, he saw a spot. "You might be pregnant," he said, "but don't tell your husband just yet until we have the final results." A few days later, the news was confirmed. My wife was pregnant. I couldn't believe it. "Weren't you using protection?" I asked. "I was," she replied, "what do we do now?"

In that moment, I remembered a fortune teller’s words from thirty-five years ago: "You will have three children; a girl, a girl..." and then, after a long pause, "...a boy." Back then, with two daughters aged eighteen and twenty, we hadn't given a third child a thought. But now, eighteen years later, it was happening.

I looked at her, waiting for my reaction. "We aren't killers," I said. "If you can do this, he is more than welcome, and I’ll be right there to help you." I told myself maybe this child would bring a new spark to our lives. After three months, we found out it was a boy. To me, the gender didn't matter —only the life did.

Time passed, and our son was born. At an age when we should have been doting on grandchildren, we were parents again. He brought immense joy to our home, but we were blind to the fate awaiting us. For the first two months, everything seemed fine. Then, he started spitting up his milk. We took him to the clinic weekly, but the nurse insisted, "Spitting up is normal." By the third month, however, he couldn't keep anything down, and his vomit turned from yellow to a worrying green.

My wife, trusting her instincts over the local clinic's advice, insisted on taking him to the hospital to see a specialist. Since I had to work, a friend drove them. When I returned home and found them still out, I grew anxious. They finally returned hours later. "They ran some tests," my wife explained. "At first, they thought it was a blockage, but even after clearing it, his abdomen remained hard. They did an ultrasound and X-rays. We’ll have the results tomorrow."

She asked me to go with them the next day. I agreed. She showed me a numbing patch they had given her. "We have to put this on his hand tomorrow morning," she said quietly, "so they can use a needle without him feeling the pain.
Early the next morning, we applied the numbing patch to his tiny hand and headed to the hospital. I honestly didn't think it was anything serious. But then the doctor arrived with a team of nurses. "The tests show a growth in the baby's abdomen," he said. He showed us a scan—a large black sphere with a tiny white dot in the center. I assumed the white dot was the tumor, but the doctor corrected me: "I'm sorry, but the large black mass is the growth."
I still didn't grasp the gravity of it. I imagined a simple course of medicine would fix everything and life would return to normal. I had no idea we were stepping into a living nightmare. "What do we do now?" I asked.
"You need to follow these nurses," he replied. "The baby needs to be admitted immediately."
It finally sank in. That "growth" was a cancerous tumor, and it had already taken over our four-month-old son's body. The doctor called the oncology department, and we were led away. I was in a daze. Looking at Amir in my arms, I couldn't believe he was sick. He was smiling at me, his eyes saying, "It's all a lie, Dad. I'm fine." A strange, silent bond formed between us in those moments. His gaze seemed to whisper, "Don't worry, I'm just pretending to be sick so I can spend more time with you."
That scene is etched into my soul. I felt like I was sleepwalking in a different world. Little Amir was in my arms, his piercing gaze pulling me into a bitter reality. I felt like a man whose blood had been drained, being led toward the gallows. My legs felt like lead as I dragged my feet across the floor, completely surrendered to Amir's fate, with no way out. I thought to myself, "I wish I were blind so I wouldn't have to see this." Yet Amir kept reassuring me with his eyes: "I'm okay, don't be afraid."
I was drowning in my thoughts, wondering, "What have I done that this child must pay the price?"
"We're here," a nurse said, snapping me back. I turned to see them standing by a door, gesturing for me to enter. For a split second, they looked like prison guards leading me

and my infant to a cell. I looked around for an escape, but Amir's eyes said, *"Let's go in, Dad. Everyone is waiting."* I smiled at him and whispered, "Only for you."

We entered the room. A nurse approached with a white gown and asked me to lay Amir on the bed so she could dress him. We were told we had to stay. Our only solace was that it wasn't solitary confinement—we were allowed to stay by his side.

A while later, two nurses entered and introduced themselves. They didn't even glance at the numbing patch on Amir's hand before leaving. An hour passed, and two more people came to brief us on the procedures, yet again, without checking the patch.

By the time a female doctor arrived with her team thirty minutes later, I had reached my **breaking point**. "So many people come in, introduce themselves, and leave without doing a thing!" I erupted. "You told us this patch loses its effect after an hour. It's been three hours now, and nothing has been done!"

The doctor was taken aback, though I noticed one of the nurses behind her gesturing in a way that showed she supported my standing up for my son. They left the room, but minutes later, that same nurse returned with a fresh numbing patch. "The doctor has ordered immediate attention for the baby," she whispered. "A colleague will be here shortly to start the IV."

Hours passed. Still, no one came. It was unbelievable—how could there be such **negligence** in a hospital with these kinds of resources? I went to the nursing station to protest. "I've called several departments," the nurse said defensively, "I'm trying my best, but no one is available to start the IV yet."

Eventually, a specialist arrived. I warned her that the anesthesia had likely worn off, but she insisted it lasted longer. As she probed for a vein and inserted the needle, Amir let out a piercing scream. It was a sound I had never heard from him before—pure, raw agony. She coolly continued until, after several painful attempts, she finally caught the vein. Exhausted from the pain, Amir finally drifted into a deep sleep.

I stepped out of the room for a moment to breathe and walked over to a large window overlooking the street. To my horror, the only thing visible was a vast, sprawling cemetery. My heart sank. What were they thinking, building a hospital facing a graveyard? How is a patient supposed to find the will to fight when that is the only view they have?
I returned to Amir's side. He was sleeping peacefully. "Thank God we are in Sweden," I whispered to myself, thinking of the medicine and facilities. "If we were back in Iran, who knows what would have happened to him?"
At dawn, a new nurse arrived to administer a new medication. "It was an ordeal to find his vein yesterday," I pleaded. "Please, be careful." She gave me a cryptic smile and started working, but the needle slipped out. Her clumsy attempts to reinsert it sent my nerves into a fray. I forced myself to stay calm and firmly asked for someone else to take over.
The nurse left and returned with her supervisor. After a brief discussion, the doctor arrived. He seemed like a kind man. He sat down, took Amir in his arms, and said, "Don't worry about the needle coming out. A four-month-old has tiny, fragile veins that can easily rupture. We often use the veins in the scalp for injections."
I was taken-aback. "The scalp? I don't think so," I replied. But with the doctor's reassurance and my wife's insistence, I eventually gave in. They took him to the operating room, but after several attempts, they couldn't find a suitable vein in his head.
They then suggested installing a device called a **"Port-a-Cath"** under the skin near his heart, allowing medication to be injected directly. This device could remain in his body for years without issue. For the sake of my son's life, I consented. The next day, I held Amir in my arms as they administered the anesthesia before taking him into surgery. Once the port was in place, they moved him to recovery, where we were allowed to stay by his side until he woke up.
Word of our situation spread quickly among our friends. The hospital room soon became a hub of support. The overwhelming kindness—especially from our dear friends Minoo and Majid, who traveled from another city to be with us—was a huge source of comfort. Our room became the

busiest in the ward; every time a nurse walked in, they found themselves in the middle of a gathering. The staff soon realized that we were far from alone.
Calls and messages poured in from friends in other countries, offering help and resources. We thanked them all, reassuring them: "Amir is in one of Sweden’s best hospitals; he has everything he needs." Even relatives from Iran reached out, sharing their prayers and promises of offerings for his recovery.
Some would ask, "Why did this happen to your child?"
I would simply reply, "There is no difference between my child and any other; why should he be exempt from illness?"
"But you've helped so many people..." they would argue.
I stayed by Amir until he opened his eyes.
As we moved him back to his room, the nurses began preparing the chemotherapy. They asked if we needed a psychologist. "What for?" I asked.
"Because a child's illness can often strain a marriage to the point of breaking," they explained.
"If we ever had disagreements before," I replied firmly, "from this day forward, we are united in our mission to save our son. We don't need a psychologist."
Seeing our resilience, they simply noted, "Tomorrow, we begin the first round of chemotherapy.
That night, I stayed awake until dawn without anyone noticing, pouring my heart out to God. I asked Him again: "What have I done wrong? Who have I wronged to deserve this? I don't know my sin, but You do. Why must this child pay the price for me? Either forgive my faults or take the penalty from me—but please, have mercy on this boy."
Morning came, and the nurses prepared Amir for his chemotherapy. Everything seemed to go well, and we were told we could take him home after the injection. But once home, we noticed his complexion turning dark and ashen. We rushed him back to the emergency room. His hand had become stiff and brittle; we were warned that even a slight pressure could break it.
After consulting with his primary specialist, the horrifying truth emerged: the dose administered was far beyond what his tiny body could handle. It had caused severe liver damage. Amir was rushed to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

Due to this **medical error**, his next treatment had to be delayed for months to allow his liver and system to recover. I confronted the doctor: "Why was the dose so aggressive? Why didn't you start small and increase it gradually? Isn't medication supposed to be calculated strictly by the patient's weight?"
"You are right," the doctor admitted. "From now on, we will start with much lower doses."
Amir’s immune system was now non-existent. The slightest bacteria could be fatal. We had to ask our friends to stop visiting unless they were absolutely certain they were healthy. Our lives became a relentless cycle of sterilization and vigilance.
He received several blood transfusions to help his body rebuild, but his system rejected some of them, triggering frightening reactions. We became experts in his care, constantly disinfecting our hands, living in a perpetual **fear of bacteria**. Everything was focused on one goal: keeping Amir safe.
Eventually, his defenses improved enough to resume chemotherapy. This time, the doctor ordered a round of **corticosteroids** before the chemo to shield his liver from further destruction.
. Soon after, the head of my company called. After offering his sympathies, he asked to meet. He informed me that the company, **Wallenstam**, had decided to sell the buildings. "We have one month to pack up," he said. "Some staff have already signed with the new company. You can choose to join them or stay with us."
My mind was so consumed by Amir that I could hardly think about work. I decided to talk to the new firm first. **Benny**, whom I had helped become a supervisor, clearly didn't want me there because I had always checked his wasteful habits. He tried to mislead me: "We asked for a massive raise, and they agreed. You should do the same." I followed his lead but stayed honest, asking for a 3,000-kronor increase. They refused, and I walked away, knowing that Amir’s treatment would prevent me from working full-time anyway.
As we continued Amir's chemotherapy, red spots suddenly appeared on his skin. We rushed him to the ER. The doctors were stumped and called for an elderly specialist known for

her "spot diagnoses." After a long wait, she declared it was **chickenpox** and ordered him into quarantine. However, a nurse whispered to us, "She’s wrong." Sure enough, after two days in isolation, the spots vanished—it was merely a reaction to the medication.

Then came the next round of chemo. Usually, Amir’s primary doctor was present, but this time, a new doctor was in charge. I reminded the staff that Amir needed **corticosteroids** before the chemo to protect his liver. The new doctor stubbornly refused: "It’s not necessary."

I stood my ground. "I won't let you touch him until he gets the steroids," I declared. "Read his file! The previous specialist made this mandatory."

He remained defiant. I lost my temper: "My son is not a toy for your experiments! One doctor says yes, another says no. You are gambling with his life!" I demanded a prescription to buy it myself, but he refused. My shouting drew two other doctors to the room. They sided with me, telling him, "The father has every right to be concerned; this has been the standard protocol for this child."

Furious, the doctor turned to his colleague and snapped, "I won't authorize it, but *you* can if you want.

The treatment proceeded smoothly for a while, until one day Amir’s condition took a turn for the worse. He developed a high fever, and we rushed him to the ER. They discovered an infection around the **Port-a-Cath** on the left side of his chest. He was taken into surgery immediately to have it removed.

Shortly after, a new port was installed on the right side. But after only a couple of sessions, I noticed signs of infection again. I pointed it out to the nurse, who told me to wait for the doctor’s rounds in the morning. When the doctor examined Amir, he dismissed my concerns, claiming there was no infection. I knew better. I asked the kind, dedicated nurse when she planned to change the needle. "Tomorrow," she said.

The next day, the doctor remained adamant that everything was fine. When the nurse prepared to change the needle, I asked her to wait. I took a piece of sterile gauze and applied gentle pressure. To our horror, a yellowish fluid oozed from

around the port. The nurse immediately took a sample to the lab, and the results confirmed my fears: another infection.

Amir's primary physician was deeply apologetic. He gave a firm instruction to the entire nursing staff: **"From now on, listen to whatever Amir's father says."** Once again, Amir had to go under the knife. They moved the port back to the left side, and for a period, the treatment went well.

However, during a routine blood draw, a young nurse arrived. Instead of sitting properly, she crouched on the floor, spreading her supplies across the dirty tiles. To my disbelief, she gathered them back up and prepared to use them on my son, even wiping her hands on the bedsheets. She began joking inappropriately with the doctor, who left in visible annoyance.

I was shaken by her lack of **hygiene and professionalism**. Later, in the oncology ward, a senior nurse who knew us well urged us to file a formal complaint. "This kind of negligence undoes all our hard work," she said. "Amir's immune system is incredibly fragile; this behavior puts lives at risk." Though we were hesitant to complain, she insisted on filing the report herself to protect the children in the ward.

A few days later, during an overnight stay for chemotherapy, that same dedicated nurse came in with a smile to draw Amir's blood. The results were perfect. She finished the procedure by injecting **Heparin**, the standard protocol to prevent blood clots in the port, ensuring everything was secure for the night.

I had just gone for a haircut when my eldest daughter called, her voice trembling. "The hospital just phoned," she said. "The doctor is suspicious; they think a grave medication error has occurred. They need Amir back immediately. They told us to be extremely careful not to let him get even a tiny scratch."

We rushed him back in a taxi. As we entered the hospital, the atmosphere was suffocating. Doctors and nurses scattered as we approached. Only one doctor and a nurse met us, quickly leading us to a room that had clearly been prepared in advance. As the doctor began his examination, I noticed traces of bloody fluid on Amir's neck. "What

happened?" I demanded. The doctor stayed silent for a moment before muttering, "It’s nothing."
My anger boiled over. I stepped into the hallway and saw the staff whispering in hushed tones. "What is going on here?" I shouted. "Why are we, his parents, the last to know?" Just then, the nurse who had administered the wrong dose approached me, begging for forgiveness. "Get out of my sight!" I snapped. Her colleagues hurried her away, telling her it wasn't the time, and tried to calm me down.
Back in the room, the doctors were hovering over Amir. "Talk to me!" I insisted. "They claimed a wrong medication was given to one of the children in the ward and they weren't sure which one," but it was a blatant lie. There were no other children there; all eyes were on Amir.
"What are the symptoms?" I asked.
"The blood thins dangerously, leading to hemorrhaging," the doctor replied.
"Is it Heparin?" I asked.
"Yes," he admitted.
"Then why are you just standing there? Do something!"
"There is an antidote," he explained, "but the side effects are life-threatening. We prefer to wait and observe since there’s no visible bleeding yet."
"What about internal bleeding?" I countered. "We can't just watch and wait for him to die!"
They finally ran blood tests. The first reading was a staggering 200. We waited in agony. Thirty minutes later, it dropped to 150, then 100. The immediate danger began to recede. But I felt a crushing pain in my chest, as if a hand were squeezing my heart. I could barely breathe.
Amir was safe, smiling as if nothing had happened, but I had died a thousand deaths in those few hours. I felt as if I were burning in the fires of hell. "How is this possible?" I asked the doctor.
"We don't know," he replied. "We can only call it a miracle."
"Could there be internal damage?" I pressed.
"We will run every test imaginable," he assured me, "to make sure Amir is truly out of harm's way.
I insisted on a brain scan for Amir, and they agreed. That same day, he was rushed through MRI and radiology. The

next morning, the doctor entered the room. "We've reviewed the scans and found nothing initial," he said, "but we've sent them for a more specialized analysis just to be certain." Relief washed over us, and finally, after another sleepless night, I collapsed onto the bed and fell into an exhausted sleep, my mind heavy with the struggles of the past.

I was startled awake by the sound of the door opening. Dr. Stefan entered, accompanied by two nurses. I looked at his face and felt a sinking dread; I assumed he had brought the nurses because the news was too much for us to bear alone. A lump formed in my throat—a suffocating weight I had suppressed for years.

Before the doctor could utter a single word, I broke. I began to sob uncontrollably, like a child watching all his toys being shattered before his eyes. In that moment, I felt a profound self-pity; I saw myself as the most wretched being alive.

I looked at Amir, not yet a year old, sitting peacefully by his mother. He smiled at me as if to comfort me, blissfully unaware of the shadow looming over us. He didn't know that every so often, we would hear that one of the "unopened buds" in this ward had suddenly "gone home." The nurses would say, "They're better now," but we knew the truth: these little flowers were withering away one by one, and the staff weren't allowed to tell us the heartbreaking reality.

Dr. Stefan and the nurses watched my breakdown in stunned silence, not yet daring to speak. My grief was overwhelming. In that moment, all I wanted was to lay my head on the shoulder of the father I never had, or in the lap of the mother I never knew, to have her sing me a lullaby and let me drift into a deep, painless sleep.

I used to think no torturer could ever break me. But if that same torturer threatened to hurt my mother, I would confess to anything just to keep her safe. The doctor had never seen me this fragile, this shattered. He stepped closer to calm me. "It's okay," he whispered.

"Then what is it?" I sobbed, barely able to speak. "You said the scans were clear!"

"They were," he replied gently. "But the specialists spotted something in the deeper analysis. There is a small blood clot beneath his skull. But don't worry—it will dissolve on its own over time."
"I know it's not your fault," I wept. "It's just my luck. Why won't this pain leave me alone? What have I done to deserve this?" I eventually wiped my tears and thanked him for his diligence, trying to find the strength to stand once more. Amir’s condition gradually improved, and the blood spots began to fade. But just as we caught our breath, the insurance office cut off my meager monthly allowance. When I called them, they were cold: "You need a doctor’s certificate."
"Why wasn't I notified before you cut it?" I asked. "Fifteen days have passed, and the doctor can't backdate a certificate. You should have warned me two weeks before the last one expired." Their response was dismissive: "It is what it is. No certificate, no pay." During the year of Amir’s illness, our income had plummeted by more than half. The financial strain was suffocating.
I approached the doctor, but he was blunt. "Amir is better now; one parent is enough for his care," he said, refusing to sign the papers. I was trapped. I needed time to notify my company, as they required a month's notice to reassign me. With no other choice, I declared myself fit for work the next day. It took two weeks to get back on the payroll, leaving us with a full month of zero income.
I eventually landed a spot in an area called **Råcksta**. My new colleagues "kindly" welcomed me by dumping all their backlogged, overdue tasks on me—the outsider. Our supervisor was a man named Peter, nicknamed "**Pe-Pe**." He was the type of person who would send himself his own greeting cards; he was incredibly full of himself and loved delegating his own unfinished work to others.
The team consisted of one person I knew from my time in Husby, and two young, inexperienced guys who had clearly been hired through connections with the shareholders. It was a classic case of how things really worked: legally, companies have to advertise jobs and interview candidates, but in reality, they hire friends and relatives first. The public ads and interviews are often just a **facade** to make it

look legal. They tell qualified applicants, "We'll be in touch," but the phone never rings.
After a few days of getting settled, I received my first work order. I immediately called the tenant: "If you're home right now, I can come over and take care of it. If not, when works best for you?"
"Right now?" he asked, sounding genuinely surprised.
"Yes," I replied.
"Come on over, I'm here."
When I rang the bell, he opened the door and looked at me skeptically. "Are you just here to inspect the problem, or are you actually going to fix it?"
"I'm here to fix it," I said.
He couldn't believe it. With a big smile, he stepped aside. "Please, come in!"
I went in and got the job done. As I was leaving, he said, "I'm in shock. You solved my problem so fast! In all the time I've lived here, this is the first time I've received this kind of service from the company."
After we said our goodbyes, I later found out he had called **Wallenstam** directly. "For the first time ever, I received excellent service today," he told them. "I really hope the person who helped me stays on the job."
Over the next few days, I heard the same thing from several other tenants. When I asked why they were so surprised, they explained the usual routine:
"It usually takes days just for someone to call us back. Then, it takes another few days for them to show up just to *look* at the problem. After that, they always say it'll take more time to order the parts. It ends up being a two-week ordeal, but you just showed up and fixed it on the spot.

THE HIDDEN DANGER: A FATHER'S INSTINCT IN AND OUT OF THE WARD

Monday arrived, and for the first time, I went to inspect the hot and cold water systems. In Sweden, hot water is

centralized, and you rarely see individual water heaters unless you're in the countryside. When I reached the boiler room, I noticed the water temperature was significantly below the safety limit. I logged the issue in the station's journal for the technician, but since low temperatures pose a high risk of bacterial growth (like Legionella), I reported it directly to my supervisor, **Peter**.

He was dismissive. "Just logging it is enough," he said. "Tato is responsible; he's from the Wallenstam side. If he doesn't fix it, we'll bring it up in the weekly meeting on Wednesday."

My shift ended at 4:00 PM. Around 4:30, as I was leaving in the dark, chilly rain, I spotted a woman from Wallenstam's regional office distributing flyers door-to-door. It was unusual; they normally asked for our help with that. I approached her and offered to take over, but she insisted on doing it herself. Then, another woman emerged from a building across the street, pushing a stroller. To my shock, I realized she had her infant with her in the cold rain while she worked.

I later learned she was **Eva Andersson**, one of the top executives at Wallenstam. Seeing the baby in that weather stirred something in me—a mix of gallantry and a father's protective instinct. I practically snatched the flyers from her and began distributing them, not even knowing what they said. Another colleague joined in to help the other woman. The next day, the regional manager came by and gave us cinema tickets as a token of her gratitude.

On Wednesday, we had our meeting with Tato and Eva. Eva, whom I recognized from my time in Husby, introduced me to Tato with high praise. "Mansour was one of our best in Husby," she said. "Not a single tenant ever complained about his work or his character. It was a tragedy that his son fell ill, but we are so glad to have him back with us."

She then asked me to share a bit about my son's situation. I gave a brief summary of the ordeal, explaining how the chemotherapy had wiped out Amir's immune system. "The slightest contact with bacteria could have been fatal," I told them. "We had to be incredibly vigilant.

I addressed **Tato** directly: "On Monday, during my inspection, I found that the hot water temperature was far

below the safety limit. This isn't just a technical issue; it's a major health risk. With the water being centralized, any bacterial growth could lead to a catastrophic outbreak for the entire community. I’m asking you to fix this immediately."
He just nodded, then glanced at **Pe-Pe**. "Did you log it in the book?" he asked coolly.
"Yes, I did," I replied.
"Then that's enough. Your job is to inspect and log. I’ll take it from here."
His attitude rubbed me the wrong way. I could sense that even his colleagues weren't fond of him. After the meeting, an old friend pulled me aside. "He’s rude and arrogant," he warned. "Try not to cross him. Everyone in the company is afraid of him." When I asked why, he just shrugged—no one really knew.
A week later, I checked the boiler room again. Nothing had changed.
At the next meeting, I brought it up once more. Tato’s patience had worn thin. "I told you, your only responsibility is to log the issues. The rest is none of your business."
"What do you mean, 'none of my business'?" I shot back. "I am responsible for this area, and it is my duty to see this through until it’s fixed."
He was caught off guard; he clearly wasn't used to anyone talking back to him. "What exactly is the problem that’s making it so hard to fix?" I pressed.
He lied right to my face: "A pump is broken. A plumber is coming to replace it soon."
I saw through his deception immediately. "I didn’t say the water pressure was low; I said the temperature was too low. All you have to do is turn up the heat."
He gave me a mocking smirk. "Fine," he said dismissively. Everyone in the room saw his poor treatment of me, but no one moved a finger. That day, I realized my friend was right—everyone was terrified of him. Despite their shared responsibility, no one had the courage to stand up for what was right. After the meeting, my friend checked to make sure no "spies" were around before whispering, "Don't pick a fight with Tato. You'll lose your job. Just log the faults and mind your own business. The rest doesn't concern us."

I looked at him, thinking of my son. "My child is sick," I said. "If he lived in one of these buildings, this negligence could kill him. There might be people in these apartments who are just as vulnerable as my boy, or even worse."
He just shook his head in sympathy. "I'm only telling you for your own sake."
The next day, I went to the boiler room early. To my relief, I saw that they had finally raised the output temperature to **65°C**. The intake was also high—the danger was over.
At the next meeting, I thanked Tato. But I could tell from his expression that he was fuming. He had only raised the temperature because I had forced his hand. When I asked what the issue had been, he lied again, claiming the plumber had finally replaced the "broken pump." Even though I knew it was a total fabrication, I simply thanked him and moved on.
The next day, I went back to the boiler room. The temperature was still within the safe range. In the corner, I spotted a small circulation pump that had been replaced. It turned out Tato wasn't lying about the plumber, but something still felt off. A few days later, I ran into the plumber himself.
"Why did you replace that pump?" I asked.
"Tato told me to," he shrugged.
"But it was perfectly fine!"
"I know," he laughed, "but it wasn't expensive. It had nothing to do with the temperature issue, though. Don't throw the old one away; we'll probably need it later."
I knew it. The pump was just a **smokescreen**.
Things were quiet for a while until **Pe-Pe** approached me.
"A few tenants have complained about you," he said.
I was stunned. "Complained about what? My work or my attitude?"
"Your attitude," he replied vaguely.
"Well, I can't please everyone. Who is it? I'd like to make amends."
"They want to remain anonymous," he said, before adding a cryptic warning: "Just watch your back."
I consulted my trusted colleague. "They're building a case against you," he warned. "Tato is behind this. He's trying to **undermine** you because he wants you gone."

Soon, Tato himself confronted me with the same story. "A tenant called to complain about you," he sneered.
"That’s strange," I countered. "In the last three months, several tenants have called Wallenstam to thank me. The company even emailed me those commendations. If there are complaints, why haven't I received a single email about them?"
He just shook his head. "They’ll send them eventually."
From then on, he picked a fight every time he saw me. Despite being Finnish himself, he would make xenophobic comments: "These foreigners should be kicked out of Sweden. If I were Prime Minister, I'd deport them all."
"You're Finnish," I reminded him. "Aren't you a foreigner too?"
"Finns aren't foreigners," he claimed stubbornly.
He was constantly trying to **rattle my nerves**. One day, a young colleague who lived in the area told me, "I saw Tato’s car parked by one of the boiler rooms late Friday evening."
"Inside the boiler room?" I asked, suspicious.
"I think so."
We checked the computer logs—there were no reported issues or emergency calls for that time.
Yet, every Monday morning, we were hit with a **flood of complaints**. Tenants claimed that throughout the Saturday and Sunday, their heaters and water went cold. But by the time we inspected the systems on Monday morning, everything was back to normal. As the week went on, the complaints would dwindle, only to restart the following Monday.
My suspicions about Tato’s late-night visits and the fluctuating temperatures grew stronger. He had keys to the entire district, and his timing—Friday evenings through Monday mornings—was too consistent to be a coincidence. During a staff meeting, he boasted that he had reduced water costs by 15% compared to the previous year. I recognized the pattern immediately; it was a repeat of what I had seen in Husby. When I asked how he achieved this without upgrading any equipment, he simply gave me a smug, silent smile.
One Monday, I inspected one of my boiler rooms and found that the automatic water mixer had been switched to

manual—something that doesn't happen on its own. The digital display showed the hot water was under 50°C. Within five minutes of switching it back to automatic, the temperature climbed above 60°C. My suspicion turned into certainty: Tato was tampering with the settings over the weekends to save costs, only to reset them before we arrived on Monday mornings. Occasionally, as he had this time, he simply forgot to cover his tracks.

I shared this with my young colleague, who had also seen Tato’s car at odd hours. "You're right," he admitted. "It’s happened in my boiler rooms too, but I thought it was just the plumber. I knew it must be Tato, but I’m too afraid to say anything." He begged me to stay silent as well.

Then came the day I went to a tenant's apartment for a minor repair. An elderly Finnish woman, dressed in mourning black, opened the door. As I worked on her leaky kitchen faucet, I asked if she lived alone.

"Can't you see I'm in black?" she replied somberly.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "What happened?"

She looked at me, puzzled. "Don't you know?"

"No, how would I?"

"You people were the ones who dropped the flyers into our homes," she said.

"Which flyers? What are you talking about?"

Her voice trembled as she delivered the crushing blow: "The ones about the **bacteria in the hot water**... the ones that caused my husband's death.

I was devastated. The very tragedy I had feared had already claimed a victim. This woman had lost her only companion, her husband, to a preventable greed. "Do you still have the flyer you mentioned?" I asked.

"It was a while ago," she said, "I’m not sure." I finished repairing the faucet and helped her sift through piles of old newspapers and mail. As we searched, she recounted the nightmare: "My husband was showering when he suddenly collapsed. My daughter called the ambulance, but it was too late. The hospital confirmed the cause of death was **Legionella bacteria** in the hot water. We complained to Wallenstam, and they claimed they sent samples to a lab. You were the ones who dropped the results in our mailboxes."

"Do you remember what it said?"
"It said no bacteria were found and everything was normal."
Finally, she remembered where she had tucked it away. She brought it to me, and as I read the words, my blood boiled. The notice from **Wallenstam** stated that water samples had been tested and were clear. It even had the audacity to warn tenants: *"The water temperature remains above 60°C; please be careful not to scald yourselves."*
It was a blatant, lethal lie. From the time of her husband's death until I started working there, the temperature had been stagnant at 58°C—the perfect breeding ground for bacteria. They hadn't even bothered to raise the heat after a man died. Tato had committed what was essentially **manslaughter** just to boast about a 15% cost saving and pocket a bonus.
"Why didn't you sue?" I asked.
"Two people from Wallenstam came to offer 'sympathy,'" she said bitterly. "They told me I wouldn't have to pay rent for a few months. But two months later, I received a threatening notice: pay the arrears or be evicted. When my daughter called them, they denied ever making such a promise. I had to pay every cent of the back rent."
My heart broke for her. She was completely alone, still wearing her mourning clothes months later. I took the flyer, promising to make a copy and return it, but she told me to keep it. "Call me if you ever need anything," I told her before leaving.
My nerves were shattered. If I had seen Tato at that moment, I would have looked him in the eye and called him exactly what he was: **a murderer.**
That night, sleep was impossible. I was consumed by a burning rage toward these heartless men—men who already possessed everything yet were willing to commit any atrocity to line their pockets further. The death of that elderly woman's husband was just one example. How many others had perished due to their insatiable greed?
It was, in every sense, a deliberate act. Men like Tato were educated; they were specialists who understood exactly what lowering the water temperature would do. They knew the catastrophe it would invite. I had seen it firsthand: many tenants were hardworking people, the elderly, or

patients on heavy medication with compromised immune systems. Like that woman’s husband, some collapsed in the shower and were rushed to the hospital where the cause was found. But what about those who passed away in their sleep? No one would ever suspect the water was their silent executioner.

It seems these wealthy parasites are never satisfied unless their bread is soaked in the blood of the people. No matter how much I tried to put it out of my mind, I couldn't. My colleagues just wanted to keep their heads down, but I kept thinking of Amir. We fought for a whole year to save his life. If he had lived in this district, this heartless man would have delivered him to his grave.

I waited for my moment. One day, Tato walked into the office. Two of my colleagues immediately made excuses to leave, sensing the tension. It was just me and him. I struck up a conversation, asking casually, "If we lower the water temperature by just one degree, how much do we save?"

"About five percent," he said, boastfully.

"So, you’ve managed to save thirty-five percent so far!" I replied.

"Around twenty percent," he said, pride gleaming in his eyes.

I looked him straight in the face. "Do you realize that by doing that, you’ve killed at least twenty people?"

The color drained from his face. He was struck dumb. He knew then that I was aware of the deaths. He gave me a sharp, cold look and walked out without a word. I went back to my work, knowing the storm was coming.

A few hours later, I walked into the company office. Ricard, the owner, and his deputy, Urban, were there. I greeted them, but there was only a heavy silence. Urban asked everyone to leave except for me. My colleagues gave me a strange look, as if they were watching a man walk to his execution.

Ricard, who had always shown me great respect, kept his head down, unable to meet my eyes—he looked ashamed.

Urban turned to me coldly: "Pack your things. Starting tomorrow, you’re transferred to **Orminge**."

"Why this sudden decision?" I asked.

"Nothing’s happened," he snapped. "We are your

employers, and we decide where you work."
"You know my son is sick," I reminded him. "I have to pick him up from daycare every day. Orminge is too far; I won’t make it in time."
Ricard remained silent, but Urban’s reply was heartless: "That’s your problem, not ours.
Why this decision?" I challenged them. "You know Wallenstam has sold those buildings and is handing them over to another company. Why send me there?"
"They haven't been sold," Urban lied flatly.
"And why me?" I pressed.
"Because you don't have a driver's license," he snapped. "We need someone here who can drive."
"When you hired me five years ago," I reminded them, "I told you about my back issues and that I couldn't drive. Why has my license suddenly become a crisis after five years? Why this rush to exile me to **Orminge** without even a week to think it over?"
Ricard, who knew I was right, couldn't even look me in the eye. He was clearly under pressure, struggling with a truth he didn't want to admit. But his deputy, Urban, responded with aggression, staring fixatedly at the desk. Just twenty-four hours earlier, this same man had told me, "You are the only employee we never have problems with. You mind your own business and work with such care and passion." Now, he was at war with what little conscience he had left.
"You know the license is just a **smokescreen**," I said firmly. "Why won't you tell the truth? Who is leaning on you?"
Silence.
"It’s Tato, isn’t it? He’s the one pulling the strings." Still, they said nothing. "I expected a reward for my integrity, not a punishment."
Ricard remained mute, but Urban began a barrage of baseless claims and lies. Suddenly, a sharp, crushing pain gripped my chest. I pressed my hand against my heart.
"Please, stop," I gasped to Urban. "I don't feel well."
He ignored my distress and continued his tirade. My legs went weak; I could no longer stand. At that moment, Ricard stood up and signaled Urban to leave with him. As Urban walked past me, he threw one last cold instruction: "Be at the main office tomorrow morning. We’re going to Orminge.

BIRTHDAY CURSE: THE LONELY FIGHT FOR JUSTICE

After the managers left, my colleagues trickled into the room. One look at my face told them everything they needed to know. But fear of the boss—and likely a direct order given on his way out—kept them silent. They watched me with guarded eyes, trying to piece together what had happened. As the initial shock subsided, a dull numbness took over. I couldn't wrap my head around how money could corrupt someone so completely, turning them into a person who would trade their soul and humanity for a profit.

"You were right," I muttered to them. "Everyone *is* afraid of Tato." They nodded in silent sympathy, not daring to utter a single "yes" or "no." They knew a spy lived among them, ready to report any sign of dissent to the boss. Only one of them caught me privately as I was leaving. "I told you not to cross him," he whispered.

"I'm not letting this go," I replied firmly. "Just wait and see." He left with a faint, knowing smile. I felt like a man who had been bled dry—weak, cold, and hollow. I struggled into my coat and headed for the bus stop. When I opened my front door, I saw balloons hanging from the ceiling, but the house was empty. I didn't even have the energy to change. I collapsed onto the sofa, sinking into a dark sea of thoughts.

A moment later, the door opened. "Mansour, is that you?" my wife called out, lifting Amir from his stroller. She walked into the living room and froze. "You're home early? Is something wrong?"

"It’s my birthday," I said with a bitter, hollow laugh.

It suddenly made sense. These kinds of "surprises" always seemed to find me on my birthday. I didn't tell her the whole story, but my face said enough. "It’s nothing," I lied. "My workplace is just changing tomorrow. I’ll have to leave an hour earlier and I'll be home an hour later."

My daughters came home from school, and we had a celebration. I played my part, trying to make it a happy day

for them. But that night, as I lay in the dark, my mind was racing. I knew why Tato wanted me gone: I was the witness to a crime. He needed me far from the scene so his tracks would stay buried. It's a good thing I joined the union, I told myself. Tomorrow, I'll go back to my old site and wait for them to help me.

The next morning, I showed up at my usual station. The young, inexperienced site manager was stunned. "You're supposed to be in Orminge," he stammered.

"My workplace is here," I said calmly. "And I have no intention of going to Orminge."

He called Ricard immediately. "Tell him to get out of there!" Ricard barked. A few minutes later, the boss called me directly: "You aren't authorized to be there. Go to your new site."

"I'm staying until the union arrives to sort this out," I insisted.

"Do whatever you want," he snapped, "but get out of that office."

To spare my colleagues the discomfort of having to force me out, I stepped outside and called my union rep, **Mohammad**. "You can't just occupy the office," he explained. "The law says you have to report to the new site first, and we'll fight the legal battle from there." Defeated by the rules, I had no choice but to head toward Orminge.

That same day, I visited a tenant's apartment for a repair. "We've formed an association and bought these buildings from Wallenstam," he told me. "I want to recommend that the new owners hire you directly to manage our maintenance."

It was the missing piece of the puzzle. I hadn't been mistaken—Wallenstam had indeed sold the properties and was due to hand them over in a few weeks. The company couldn't fire me without cause; by law, if they let me go, they wouldn't be allowed to hire a replacement. So, they chose to "transfer"—or more accurately, **exile**—me to **Orminge**. Their plan was transparent: once the buildings were handed over, they would claim my position no longer existed and let me go.

I've always hated idleness, so I began organizing the chaotic warehouse at the new site. A Swedish colleague

there knew the company was trying to push me out, but he didn't bother to tell me that tidying up was pointless since everything was being turned over to another firm.
My old back injury flared up from moving the heavy equipment. Soon, my left leg went numb. At my colleague's insistence, I saw an orthopedist. After reviewing the scans, the doctor prescribed a month of part-time medical leave, along with massage therapy and medication. I forwarded the **sick leave certificate** to the office.
When the bosses received it, they realized their **plan had backfired**. Legally, they couldn't terminate an employee on medical leave; instead, they were now obligated to provide me with "light duties."
A few hours after I finished my first half-day, **Ricard** called me. His tone was vile and demeaning. "Who do you think you are?" he barked, launching into a tirade designed to break my spirit. It became clear that if this continued, my mental health would suffer even more than my physical injuries.
I called Ricard the next day. "We need to talk," I said. He likely thought he'd broken my spirit enough that I was ready to resign. "Come in tomorrow," he replied. I felt utterly alone in my fight to stop the silent deaths of the tenants. I decided then to record our entire conversation—I needed a "smoking gun" to prove to the union the real reason behind my dismissal.
I equipped myself with a voice recorder, practiced a few times, and headed to the meeting. Whenever I faced Ricard, he seemed unable to look me in the eye, as if burdened by shame. He stood up and shook my hand. I sat down, the recorder already running in my pocket. "You treated me despicably yesterday," I began.
"I know," he sighed. "I apologize. I promise it won't happen again today."
"I'm here to resolve this, not escalate it," I told him. "You've always respected me, and I've respected you. What changed so suddenly?"
He tried to dodge the truth at first, but his conscience was restless. After a long silence, he looked at me. "I've always said you were one of our best. We never had a single issue with you. But things are different now."

"How?" I pressed.
"The problem is Tato," he admitted. "He doesn't want you in this company anymore."
"Since when does Tato make executive decisions for *your* company?"
"We have fifty employees," Ricard explained, his voice heavy. "Most of them work on Wallenstam properties. Tato gave us an ultimatum: either fire Mansour, or I take the entire contract away from your firm and give it to someone else. You can't expect me to jeopardize fifty families for the sake of one man."
"Fine," I said. "Then put it in writing. State that you are firing me because of his pressure."
"I can't do that," he stammered. "If I fire you, I have to claim it's because you don't have a driver's license."
"Go ahead," I challenged him. "Write that." He knew that excuse wouldn't hold up in court—the union would point to my medical records and my back injury.
"I'll pay you three months' salary in a lump sum," he offered, "on the condition that you resign voluntarily."
I looked at him with disappointment. "I expected a commendation for my integrity, not a punishment for stopping Tato’s crimes. I did my duty as an employee and a human being. I suspected Tato was behind this; now I’m certain. I’m not letting this go, and I’m certainly not resigning."
Ricard looked devastated, trapped in a mess of his own making. I had heard enough. I stood up and walked out, feeling a strange sense of peace. I finally had the truth: Tato was the one who had cooked up this bitter meal for me.
The company chose to turn a blind eye to Tato’s crimes just to protect its own interests. This realization weighed heavily on me; I felt a profound responsibility to protect the tenants. I knew the risks, but I had to act. Over 30% of the residents in Råcksta were elderly or disabled—vulnerable people on heavy medication whose lives were literally in the hands of a man like Tato.
From that day on, my only ally was the voice recorder I kept hidden at all times. I began collecting evidence, intending to take it to the police and put an end to this.

A few days later, Tato showed up at my new site in Orminge for a meeting. He sat on the sofa and poured himself a cup of coffee. I seized the moment, switched on my recorder, and sat near him. "Can I ask you something?" I started.
"Go ahead," he said.
"Why did you tell the company to kick me out of Råcksta?"
"I didn't," he lied.
"I know you did. I just don't know what you're so afraid of that you'd deny it."
"Why should I be afraid?" he snapped. "I have every right to tell the company who I want working on my sites."
"I know exactly why you want me gone," I said, looking him in the eye. "You want me out of the way so you can lower the water temperature again and kill more people."
He turned pale with rage, stood up without touching his coffee, and stormed out.
Soon after, the transition to the new firm was complete, and the systematic harassment began. They knew I wouldn't resign, so they tried to break me. My sleep vanished. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw sick children and elderly people reaching out to me for help, while Tato continued his work undisturbed. Nightmares became my constant companions.
At work, they treated me like a political football—tossing me from one task to another. They assigned me jobs that were physically impossible for me or entirely outside my role, like clearing out heavy warehouses or mowing massive lawns. They refused to give me a fixed station, sending me instead to clean up other people’s backlogged work.
One day, while heading to a site with a colleague, my phone rang. It was Urban, the deputy. "You need to be at the office by noon," he said. "Tapio wants to speak with you."
I agreed and turned to my colleague. "Who is Tapio?"
"He's one of the shareholders," my colleague replied. "And he's got a foul mouth. Watch out."
"I've never met him. What could he want?"
"Well," my colleague said, looking at me sideways, "you *did* get into a fight with his brother, didn't you?"
I froze. "Tato is Tapio's brother?"
"Yes," he confirmed. "And he holds a powerful position in this company. Without him, this whole firm would crumble.

He continued, lowering his voice: "**Wallenstam** is a giant, and they outsource almost all their maintenance. On paper, they put contracts up for public tender, but in reality, it's all rigged. Tato, Tapio’s brother, is a shareholder at Wallenstam. He uses his influence to cancel contracts with other firms and funnel them toward our company through his brother."

"In exchange, Tato pockets illegal **kickbacks** and commissions from our firm. Meanwhile, Tapio gets his cut for 'securing' the new business, on top of his dividends and salary. Our company, in turn, looks the other way regarding all of Wallenstam's illegal practices."

"What kind of practices?" I asked.

"For instance," he explained, "the contract states our firm must provide four vehicles and five permanent staff for thousands of apartments. In reality, we don't even provide half of that. They even charge the company for personal expenses—clothes, phones, shoes—for their own families. Instead of buying us new gear, they hand out used work clothes to the staff and forge the invoices. It’s a massive **fraud scheme**, and the company stays silent to keep the contracts flowing."

He pulled out his phone as proof. "My phone has been broken for ages, but I have to wait until one of their family members buys a new one so I can inherit their hand-me-down. Of course, if you 'dance to their tune' and keep your mouth shut, they’ll buy you brand-new gear."

He warned me again to be extremely careful. Everyone knew I had crossed Tato, and the wheels were already in motion to eliminate me. "Let them do whatever they want," I told him firmly. "I will not be silenced." He looked at me with a mix of worry and respect. As he dropped me off at the office, he flashed me a silent **victory sign**.

I walked into the company cafeteria. A few people were scattered at the tables, but a heavy, artificial silence hung over the room—it was as if they had all been warned not to associate with me. I had barely sat down when Urban called. "Where are you?" he asked. "In the dining hall," I replied. "Stay there. I’m coming."

A few minutes later, he arrived. "What does Tapio want with me?" I pressed.

"I don't know," he lied, looking away.
"Then why is he late?"
"He’s on his way," Urban said, checking his phone.
I excused myself to the restroom to double-check my voice recorder. It was my only protection—a silent witness to ensure that if anything happened to me, the truth would survive. When I returned, **Tapio** finally arrived. He marched past us into his office and signaled Urban to follow. "Let’s go," Urban whispered to me.
As we entered, Tapio shook hands with Urban. When I extended my hand, he pulled back with visible disgust, refusing the gesture. "If this is how our conversation is going to start," I said firmly, "then I have no interest in speaking with you."
"Sit down first," he snapped. "We’ll see where it goes from there." Urban gestured for me to comply.
I stepped into that room knowing I was outnumbered. Tapio had his **henchman** by his side—a man who lived off Tapio’s payroll and whose "testimony" was always for sale. This same man had previously caused me severe distress with his lies. To him, the only thing that mattered was serving his master.
They sat down, and I took my seat directly across from Tapio, fueled by the need to defend those who couldn't defend themselves. The difference between us was simple: he was a slave to his money, while I was guided by my conscience. He thought that because he was the "boss," he owned me. He didn't realize that my only Master is God. He believed his wealth could buy me, and if not, his hulking frame and his lackey would intimidate me. A man who measures everything in gold could only assume I was there to extort him.
He leaned back, putting on an act of authority. "Are you happy with your work?" he began.
"I was very happy when I was at Råcksta," I replied calmly.
"Well, they aren't happy with you," he snapped. "The tenants at Wallenstam don't want you there."
"Is 'Wallenstam' just a code word for your brother, Tato?" I countered. "Because I haven't had a single complaint from a tenant—only praise."
His face darkened. "Why did you threaten my brother and

his family?"
"You know as well as I do that I did no such thing," I said. "It’s your brother who is threatening the lives of our tenants."
"Anyone who threatens my brother's family deals with me," he growled.
"If I’ve made a threat, call the police and have them take me away," I challenged him. "But right now, you are the one making threats."
At that moment, he drew his hand across his throat in a slow, chilling gesture from left to right. "Yeah," he muttered, "I know exactly what to do with anyone who crosses my family." He was making it clear: he was threatening to end my life.
"You're threatening me again," I said, standing up. "I have no interest in continuing this conversation with you."
As I walked toward the door, he barked, "Hand over every piece of clothing and equipment with the Wallenstam logo to Urban."
I turned back, looking him in the eye. "You have no right to make decisions for me."
I left his office, intending to find Ricard, but Urban blocked my way. "Ricard is away on a trip," he lied. I knew then that Tapio had orchestrated this; he had pushed Ricard aside so he could use raw **intimidation** to force my resignation.
I went home that evening feeling proud that I hadn't backed down. But that night, as I watched little Amir sleeping peacefully, a cold terror gripped my heart. What if this man actually carries out his threat? What if he hurts my wife or children? These people worshipped money; there was no limit to what they might do.
I couldn't close my eyes. Every shadow seemed like an assassin; every creak of the floor felt like someone coming for my children. I checked the door repeatedly, haunted by the thought of my innocent family paying for my principles. I wasn't afraid for myself—only for them.
The next morning, I forced myself to stay composed. Don't let him see you're afraid, I told myself. That was exactly what he wanted. I handed over my Wallenstam gear to Urban. Apparently, Tapio had bragged to him the day before: "I guarantee Mansour will either show up with a

resignation letter tomorrow or be too terrified to show his face at all."
Urban looked at me, surprised. "How are you?" he asked.
"Never better," I replied firmly. When he realized there was no resignation letter, he told me to wait. He hurried to Tapio's office to report my arrival and wait for further instructions on how to break me.
From that day on, the harassment intensified. They went as far as ordering my colleagues to keep their distance from me, effectively placing me in **social isolation**. On the outside, I maintained a facade of strength, showing them that their threats hadn't broken my spirit. But at night, an involuntary terror would creep in.
Mentally, I was becoming more vulnerable. The constant pressure was draining me, and I felt myself growing weaker with each passing day.
It was heartbreaking to watch **Urban**. Only a few weeks ago, he had been full of nothing but praise for my dedication and work ethic. Now, he had joined forces with **Tapio**, becoming a tool in their relentless campaign to force my resignation. They were no longer just attacking my job; they were attacking my soul.

BROKEN BODY, SHATTERED SPIRIT: THE WEIGHT OF INJUSTICE

The harassment escalated to a point where my mental health began to crumble. One day, they ordered me to clear out several warehouses—heavy labor that was nowhere in my contract as a technical specialist. When I protested, reminding them of my back injury, the supervisor gave me a **sly, mocking grin**. "Suit yourself," he said, "but we have no other work for you."
I pushed myself until the inevitable happened. While carrying a heavy load down a flight of stairs, a searing pain shot through my spine. I collapsed onto the steps, my left leg going completely numb. I was paralyzed by the pain.
Later that day, I struggled to a clinic. The doctor prescribed

heavy painkillers and referred me to a local health center for X-rays. There, I met a doctor from my own homeland, but even he was dismissive at first, joking that I "looked healthier than him." I had to fight just to be heard: "It's my back that's broken, not my face."

My spirit was fading, and the physical agony only deepened the darkness. When the X-ray results finally came in, the specialist was in shock. "I thought there had been a mistake with the files," he said, looking at the images and then at me. "I can't believe these belong to you. Your vertebrae from L1 to L5 are severely damaged. Two disks are crushing your nerves. You're in a dangerous condition—you likely need surgery. Your neck is also showing signs of severe wear." He immediately placed me on full medical leave and warned: "You must stop working. You have to let the pain show, or you'll lead the doctors to a false diagnosis."

The pain became my constant shadow. In the mornings, I couldn't even stand; I had to crawl on all fours just to get my body moving. At night, the nightmares of my family being harmed merged with the physical throb of my heart. My heartbeat was so loud it sounded like someone **beating a drum** against my chest, skipping beats and filling me with dread.

During a massage session, the therapist—a kind, expectant mother—noticed my distress. I told her everything: the workplace bullying, the **death threats**, and the insomnia. She urged me to see a cardiologist. The specialist eventually prescribed two types of heart medication, telling me we'd re-evaluate in a month. I was a shell of my former self. My emotions were so raw that the slightest sentimental sight would move me to uncontrollable tears, a vulnerability I tried desperately to hide. I was now surviving on twelve pills a day.

I was at my lowest point, both mentally and physically, when **Ricard** called. "Be at the office at 1:00 PM," he said. "A union representative is coming to discuss your situation." The next day, I arrived to find Ricard with two other men. One introduced himself as **Mohammad**, my union rep. "They told me they'd contact you directly," he claimed when I asked why I hadn't been notified sooner.

We entered the meeting room. Ricard sat across from me next to the employer's union representative, a man in an expensive suit who radiated power. Mohammad invited me to speak first. For a moment, I felt a spark of hope. I pulled out my small voice recorder and placed it on the table. "I intend to record this session," I announced.

"I have served this company for years with an unblemished record," I began. "Everything changed when I discovered a man named **Tato** was responsible for the deaths of several tenants. I acted on my professional and moral duty to stop him. In retaliation, I have been threatened and pressured to resign so they can continue their inhumane activities undisturbed."

They listened in silence. The company's representative spoke up: "We've had our own discussions and are looking for a resolution." Then, he and my own representative stepped out of the room to "deliberate." I was left alone with Ricard. He kept his head down, looking deeply ashamed of what was being done to me, yet he remained paralyzed by the pressure from above.

It became clear to me that this entire meeting was a **charade**. My representative, who had seemed supportive at first, had likely already reached an agreement with the other side. They weren't looking for justice; they were negotiating the terms of my exit and perhaps even an **under-the-table deal**. When they returned, Mohammad's entire demeanor had shifted. He was no longer there to defend me—he was there to finish the job they had started.

When Ricard and the company lawyer stepped out, Mohammad turned to me. "What's your move?"

"I don't know the law," I said. "That's what you're here for."

"If you want my advice," he whispered, "cut ties now. Otherwise, they'll make your life a living hell."

"But isn't that why I pay the union? To stop them from doing that?"

"We can support you," he said dismissively, "but a boss can just put a chair in front of a wall and tell you to stare at it for eight hours a day. They won't fire you, but they'll make sure you have nothing to do but wither away."

"They are murderers!" I cried. "They just want to get rid of me because I know the truth."
"Then resign!" he urged. "Resign and go to the police. With your skills, you'll find a better job in no time."
"I have a spinal injury," I reminded him. "I can't just start a new job. I have surgery scheduled and a doctor’s certificate for full bed rest."
He wasn't listening. "I can pressure them to give you two months' pay to just stay home," he said, ignoring that Ricard had already offered me three. "Think about it. It’s better than the long, agonizing battle if you stay."
He was close to breaking my resolve when the door swung open. The company’s representative peeked in. "Finished? Can we come back?"
"We’re done," Mohammad said, glancing at me. "Come in."
He slid the resignation form toward me—a document clearly drafted in advance. It was worded so that by signing, I would **waive all my rights** to ever sue or complain again. Mohammad’s demoralizing words had done their job; I was exhausted, broken by the system, and desperate for a moment of peace.
He gave me a sharp nod, as if to say, "Sign it. End this for all of us." Despite knowing my medical leave protected me from being fired, the pressure from my own 'protector' was too much. I signed. He snatched the paper and handed it over to the company like a trophy.
I remembered the words of that furniture store owner from years ago: "I'll just tuck a rug under the union rep's arm." I wondered then how many months of my salary they had slipped under the table to buy his silence and crush his conscience.
We walked out of the office together. He sat in his battered, aging car, coughing into life after several failed starts. "Do you have a ride?" he asked. "No," I replied. "Get in, I’ll drop you at the station." As we drove, I asked him how many members were in the union. He launched into a tirade about the union's dire finances and how members weren't paying their dues. It became clear: the organization was so broke it couldn't pay him a decent wage, so he supplemented his income with **under-the-table kickbacks** from employers.

I sat there, a stranger in a foreign land, wondering who I had put my trust in. I had believed in the myth of democracy and that the law protected everyone equally. Instead, I found a legal system that was powerless to defend my rights, yet fully at the service of those with power.

Having signed that forced resignation—a document signed out of pure intimidation that waived my right to sue—I returned home. I tried to bury the past, telling myself to focus on my own mental health after a year of putting everyone else first. But my conscience wouldn't let me rest. The nightmares were relentless. As soon as I closed my eyes, I saw the faces of the sick children and the elderly tenants in Råcksta, their hands outstretched, pleading for help I could no longer give.

One day, while at the clinic, I ran into an old acquaintance. "What on earth are you doing here?" he asked, startled by my appearance. I told him everything: the harassment at the company, the mental breakdown, the physical toll. "I've worked without a break since my third day in Sweden," I said. "I spent my life solving other people's problems, and now, with a failing heart and a broken back, I can't even solve my own."

As we spoke, a man approached us. My friend introduced me and explained my situation. The man looked at me intently. "My friend," he said, "I am a **police officer**. Let me help you."

I gave a bitter laugh. "The police won't do anything," I said. "Especially for someone like me—I'm on the list of people the police ignore." He was taken aback. "Why would you say that?" I told him about the Swedish accountant's fraud in the **Tenstacity** case and how the police had buried it. His professional pride was stung. "That's not how it works!" he insisted.

He took my number and handed me his card. "I'm going to speak with a colleague tomorrow," he said firmly. "I will call you." I thanked him, though deep down, I was still waiting for the next blow to fall.

The next day, the officer called. "I spoke with my colleague," he said. "I need you to write a summary of everything and send it to his address." With my daughter's

help, I drafted a report. I detailed how these men had caused multiple deaths and were still operating with impunity. I sent it off, trying to convince myself that the police would finally bring them to justice.
Yet, deep down, I knew how this **bureaucracy** worked. I knew that in such a sluggish system, complaints often move at a snail's pace—or find their way directly into the trash. Still, I told myself: *I have done my duty. The rest is in their hands.*
But my conscience was a relentless judge. I grew more fragile by the day. I tried to bury myself in my computer, but the slightest hint of injustice or even a touch of emotion would send me into uncontrollable tears. An internal storm was raging; a sense of fear and insecurity haunted me. I would cover my face to hide the tears from my children, but they knew. They could see their father breaking. It tormented me that people were dying and I was powerless to stop it, while everyone else remained silent.
It was as if the entire country had been injected with a **numbing agent**. No one wanted to get involved; everyone was looking out only for themselves.
Friends offered a barrage of suggestions: "I know a TV reporter who loves these stories," one said. "Join the Communist union; they'll fight for you," said another. "Call the Metro newspaper." Everyone had a map, but no one was willing to walk the path with me. The institutions they pointed to were just as indifferent. Only one person showed a glimmer of interest but insisted I send the documents first to see if they were "worth their time." I refused. "I want to meet in person," I replied. "I need to explain the weight of this evidence as I hand it over.

THE THERAPIST WHO WAS HIS OWN PATIENT

The pressure was becoming unbearable, and my grip on my emotions was slipping by the day. One afternoon, my

daughter looked at me with concern. "Dad, why don't you reach out to that psychologist friend of yours? Maybe he can help. Why did you stop seeing him anyway?"
"Because he wasn't a good person," I replied. "He spun beautiful stories, but his actions never matched his words. I'm not holding a grudge; I just chose to cut him out of my life."
"But he's supposed to be excellent at what he does," she insisted. After her repeated nudging, I finally gave in. I had deleted his number long ago, so I had to track it down through a mutual friend. When he didn't answer my call, I found him on Facebook and sent a message explaining that I needed his help. Hours later, he replied, claiming he was traveling but would call me soon.
I immediately remembered his old habits—how he'd tell me, "Tomorrow I have to lecture at a university in another city," only for me to spot him the next day walking into a friend's house near my workplace. He was a **pathological liar**.
I could never forget the time he heard that Uppsala University had invited Mr. Banisadr to lecture on his new book, *Human Rights in Islam*. This psychologist, who claimed to have worked in the propaganda wing of an organization that collaborated with Saddam Hussein, boasted to me: "I know hundreds of people. I'll make sure they all attend. I'll even tell the hundreds of students I teach at the university."
He went even further, claiming, "I'll coordinate with Sweden's TV4. I'll have them fly to France first to interview Mr. Banisadr and build momentum for his arrival." When I told him I planned to call certain influential people myself, he brushed me off: "I know them all. Leave it to me; I'll handle the invites."
A week before the event, I kept checking in. "Everyone is informed," he'd say. "Everything is set." One time he even whispered into the phone, "I was just lecturing my students when I remembered my meeting with the head of TV4. I had to excuse myself to the restroom to take this call. Don't worry, it's all handled."
In reality, not a single one of his promises materialized. On the day of the event, none of the "friends" he claimed to have notified showed up. Those who happened to hear

about it on the radio and attended were hurt. "Why didn't you tell us?" they asked me. When I told them the psychologist had promised to inform them, they were baffled. "He never said a word to us."

These constant deceptions were the reason I had distanced myself from him. It had been a long time since we last spoke. And yet, here I was, reaching out to him, hoping that perhaps his professional knowledge could soothe the pain that his character never could.

He called me with an air of importance. "I have two offices," he claimed, "one in Gamla Stan and another in Sollentuna. Since you live in Tensta, Sollentuna is closer for you." I told him it didn't matter. "Saturday at 3:00 PM in Sollentuna then," he decided.

When I arrived and called him, he said he was by the parking entrance. We met, and he suggested we head to his "office." On the way, we passed a cafeteria. "Tea or coffee?" he asked. I wondered why an office wouldn't have its own kettle, but I assumed he just wanted a barista-made coffee since it was the weekend.

"Go find us a good spot while I grab the coffees," he said.

"Are we sitting *here*?" I asked, surprised. "Everyone will hear our conversation."

"You're right," he pivoted quickly. "Let's go to that cozy cafeteria in the corner instead."

"Why don't we just go to your office?" I pressed.

His excuse was ready: "It was a massive office with several employees, but I decided to close it. I don't take insurance patients anymore because my hourly rate—2,000 kronor—is too high for most. Now I mostly do corporate seminars and lectures; they pay much better."

I told him I had no issue paying his fee, but he insisted he didn't charge friends. I bit my tongue about his "other office" in Gamla Stan, knowing it was likely as imaginary as this one. I remembered a psychologist friend in Germany once telling me that therapists need therapy too, to ensure their patients' traumas don't distort their own reality. This man seemed to be living in a distorted reality of his own making.

We eventually settled into a quiet corner with tea and pastries. "When I heard how much you were struggling," he said, leaning in, "I dropped everything to see you."
I poured my heart out, recounting the ordeal I had been through. As he listened, his facade of grandeur seemed to slip away, replaced by genuine emotion. He placed a hand on my shoulder. "I envy you, Mansour," he whispered. "I studied abroad with money sent by my parents, never facing a real struggle. But you—through every peak and valley, you stood your ground. You fought your battles and continued to fight for the freedom of your country. You are a man of principle and a true fighter. People like you are rare in this world.
He began praising his wife's work, claiming he referred most of his clients to her with great success. He insisted I see her. "I'll speak with her tonight," he promised, "I'll explain your situation and guide her on how to help you." Despite my hesitation, his persistence wore me down, and I agreed to open up to her.
"We heard about your son's illness," he said, shifting the topic. "How is he now?"
"Better," I replied shortly.
"And your daughters?"
"The eldest is studying psychology," I said, "and the youngest, who is the same age as yours, is in pharmacy school."
"I saw your eldest recently," he noted. "Tell her if she needs help with her studies or finding work, she should call me. I have many influential connections."
"And your daughter?" I asked.
"She's a student too," he said smoothly. "She has some business here today. I actually need to go pick her up and take her home now."
I thanked him for listening and we parted ways. I later discovered the truth: his daughter was working in a small newsstand right there in the mall. The only reason he had chosen "Sollentuna" for our meeting was to give her a ride home. The stories of his grand offices and staff were nothing but a **facade**.
When I got home, my eldest daughter asked, "How did it go?"

"He mostly just listened," I said. "He was moved by the story, but he wants me to continue with his wife. He also mentioned you should call him if you need any help with your psychology degree or career leads." I handed her his number.
The next day, I called his wife to schedule an appointment.
"Legally, we aren't supposed to treat acquaintances," she began.
"I don't want to cause any trouble for you," I assured her.
"It’s fine," she whispered, "just don't tell anyone we know each other."
A few days later, I went to see her. For thirty minutes, I tried to speak, but my emotions were raw; the tears kept falling, choking my words. She sat in silence, watching the clock. "Time's up," she said finally. "I'll give you a new slot for the next session."
"Don't you have any initial thoughts or advice?" I pleaded. "What should I do to overcome this?"
Her response was clinical. "You need several sessions. Starting next time, you must recount your entire life story—from your childhood to your marriage. Only then can I determine how to help you.
I returned home and asked my eldest daughter, "Have you called 'Uncle'—the psychologist—yet?"
"No," she replied.
"You were the one praising him," I reminded her. "You need guidance, and he’s offered to help. Why not reach out?" At my persistence, she finally called. He showered her with promises regarding her studies and future career. She was thrilled to have reconnected with them, hoping to rekindle her friendship with his daughter as well.
A few days later, it was time for my follow-up with the cardiologist. My youngest daughter accompanied me.
"Are you taking the medication on schedule?" the doctor asked.
"Yes," I managed to say.
"And how do you feel?"
Before I could utter another word, the tears took over. A heavy lump blocked my throat, and I could only whisper through the sobs, "You can see for yourself how I am."

The doctor looked at me, bewildered. "Why has it come to this?"
"I don't know," I gasped.
"Stop taking the previous pills immediately," he commanded. "We need to switch your medication, but the new ones are potent and must be administered under strict **hospital supervision**. You'll be admitted for three days so we can monitor your reaction and ensure your safety."
The day I was set to be admitted, my eldest daughter had her scheduled meeting with the psychologist. I couldn't shake a lingering sense of **dread**. My gut was screaming at me. "He's a smooth talker, and he lies constantly," I warned her. "Be careful. Don't be fooled by his empty promises." I urged her to always address him as "Uncle" to maintain a respectful distance. She reassured me, "Don't worry, Dad. I'll watch my back."
I checked into the hospital and began the new treatment. By a twist of fate, one of the nurses was an old acquaintance from my days working in **Husby**. I remembered her well; she and her husband lived in one of the buildings I managed. Back then, during a bitter dispute with her husband, she had called me in a panic, asking me to change her locks so he couldn't get in and clear out the house while she was away. Now, the man who once secured her home was the one needing her care.
I remembered going to that nurse's home years ago with a new lock in my hand. I told her plainly, "There are too many broken people in this country who thrive on tearing couples apart. They'll help you separate, but once you're alone, they'll leave you to fend for yourself."
I had urged her to think of her two children. "Changing this lock takes five minutes," I told her, "but once your husband sees it, he'll know the door to reconciliation is bolted shut. He may not be the perfect husband, but he might be a good father. Don't let others make this choice for you." She listened. I handed her the lock and said, "Keep this. If things don't improve, call me and I'll change it myself." My selfless advice had saved her family, and she never forgot it. Now, in that hospital ward, the **cycle had come full circle**—she was there to care for me.

As evening fell, my daughter arrived with my psychologist "friend." I had completely forgotten it was my daughter's birthday. He had brought a gift, presenting it with an air of grandiosity. My wife, our children, and the nurse all gathered around.

The psychologist immediately began his usual performance, desperate to be the center of attention. He teased my little son, dangling his car keys. "You want these? They're yours," he joked. Then he pulled out a promotional pen, then his business card, performing like a salesman. Finally, he handed his car keys to my daughter, asking her to go to his car and retrieve a second mobile phone he had "forgotten" there. It was all a calculated display of wealth and importance.

He flashed his business card at the nurse, but when she tried to hand it back after a glance, he stopped her. "Did you look closely?" he asked, his voice dripping with feigned importance.

"Yes," she replied, puzzled.

"No, you didn't!" He thrust the card back in front of her eyes. "Do you recognize the name on this card? This man is the most renowned surgeon and specialist in all of Sweden. He runs several hospitals." Then came the hook: "Would you like me to speak with him? I could get you a much better position with a far higher salary."

The poor nurse, lured by the promise, was starstruck.

"What is it that you do?" she asked.

"I'm a psychologist," he declared. "I can look at anyone and tell their exact age, their history..." He knew exactly what she would ask next: "How old am I?"

It was a cheap parlor trick. While my daughter was retrieving his second phone from the car, he had already looked up the nurse's name from her ID badge. By the time he held the phone, he had her full birth records on the screen. When he recited her exact birth date, the nurse was speechless, convinced of his "mystical" powers. Shortly after, his phone rang—likely another staged call—and he made a hurried exit.

Once he was gone, I turned to my daughter, my heart sinking. "What's the story with this gift? How did he even know it was your birthday?"

"I don't know, Dad," she said, looking unsettled. "He probably used that same app on me. Earlier, he told me it was the birthday of one of his 'students' and asked me to help him pick out a women's perfume. He asked me what a girl my age would like. I thought it was for his own daughter. I suggested some classic scents, but he insisted on something 'modern.' When we reached the hospital, he handed it to me as a birthday surprise."

My **paternal instincts** went into overdrive. My skin crawled. This wasn't a gesture of friendship; it was a **calculated trap**. This man was a notorious cheapskate—he wouldn't even buy such a gift for his own wife. "Why this sudden extravagance?" I asked myself. The "Uncle" I had trusted was revealing a much darker side. I gripped my daughter's hand. "Stay away from him," I pleaded. "Be on your guard. This isn't a gift; it's a snare.

After three days in the hospital, the new medication proved effective. I was discharged with a fresh prescription and a sense of physical relief, but the shadows at home were still lingering. A couple of days later, the psychologist called my daughter. "Hello, Uncle," she picked up.

"Call me Saied," he interrupted. He began spinning a disturbing web of stories. "I'm very close with my students, mostly young women. We travel abroad together, share hotel rooms, and we're so comfortable that we lounge around in our underwear..." It was a blatant attempt at **grooming**.

A few days later, on a holiday, he called again with a "job offer." "Come over for an hour, do some work for me, and I'll pay you well under the table."

When my daughter replied, "Uncle, I'm looking for legal employment, not 'black' work," he grew agitated. "You need to be like a **wolf**," he told her. "You have to seize every opportunity."

My daughter later asked me, "Dad, what does he mean by being a wolf?"

"He's trying to say *he* is the opportunity," I explained. "He's trying to manipulate you. That expensive perfume wasn't a gift; it was a bribe. He sees that I'm ill and vulnerable, and he's trying to exploit that." I realized he was a man trapped

in a loveless marriage, projecting his suppressed desires onto those he felt he could control.
My daughter’s insight was sharp. "Dad, I feel sorry for his students," she said. "Think of the power he holds over their grades, or worse, his patients. Who would believe a person with mental health struggles if they tried to report him?" I felt a wave of relief; my daughter had seen through his **predatory mask**.
When he called again, she put him on speaker so her sister could hear. They were both mortified. They couldn't believe such words were coming from a man they once called "Uncle." My daughter hung up and recounted the conversation to me, her sister confirming every sordid detail. I wanted to write a letter to his wife and return the cash for the perfume as a warning, but my daughter stopped me. "I feel bad for her," she said. "Let’s just cut him off completely."
He soon realized we were on to him. He blocked me on social media and vanished from our lives. It was the end of a dark chapter. I felt as though I hadn't had a real night’s sleep in years, but finally, the predator had retreated.

THE SILENT BOND: DISCOVERING A MOTHER’S LOVE

It had been only a few days since the last ordeal when the phone rang. I felt a strange vibration in the air, as if the ringtone itself carried a different weight. I picked up. "Hello?"
It was my sister, the one twenty months my senior. Her voice was thick with grief. "I’m so sorry... Mother has passed away."
I had spent my life believing her presence or absence made no difference to me. Yet, hearing those words, the ground beneath my feet gave way. I felt uprooted, like a tree torn from the earth, drifting in a cold, silent vacuum. I was suspended in a void with no anchor, no sensation. I didn't know whether to scream or stay silent.

God, why am I like this? I asked myself. I never felt I had a mother to lose, so why does this hit so hard? I told my sister I would do whatever was needed for the funeral and asked to be kept informed. After we hung up, I looked at my wife and children. They were frozen, unsure how to react to my lack of emotion. I felt as if I'd been injected with a numbing agent; nothing mattered. I just sat there, motionless.

I don't know how much time passed before I called my elder brother. His wife answered, offering her condolences before handing him the phone. My family watched me closely, waiting for a crack in my facade, a tear, a sign of mourning. They feared that if I didn't let the grief out, my struggling heart might finally give up. But my mind was a cinema, replaying every frame of my past in a loop. Part of me felt a twisted sense of peace, knowing my father, who loved her dearly, was no longer alone in eternity. Their long separation was over.

After the burial, I called my brother's home again. When his wife realized it was me, her voice changed. "Mansour, tell me... what is the story behind this? Why is yours the only name registered in Mother's birth certificate?"

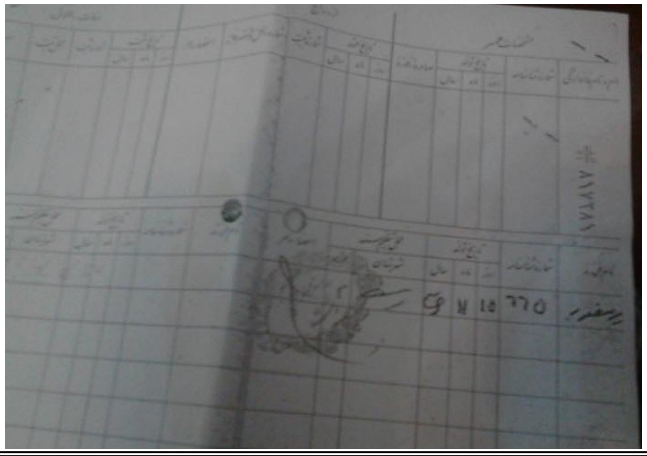
I was stunned. *Did she actually love me?*

"Are you serious?" I gasped.

"I swear to God," she said. "On the day of the funeral, we opened her documents, and everyone saw it. Yours is the only child's name she had recorded."

"I don't know," I whispered. "I only know that in my father's documents, mine was also the only name."

I asked my sister to send me a copy. When it arrived the next day, I held the proof of a silent, hidden devotion in my hands.



My mother’s third-day memorial passed, and her headstone was ordered. The ceremonies were dignified, yet I felt a familiar, haunting void. I remembered when my father passed; everyone wept while I stood frozen, unable to shed a single tear. It was only after the crowds dispersed and life resumed its mundane rhythm that the crushing weight of loneliness finally settled in my heart. This time, the grief arrived the same way—slowly, silently, and deeply.

In the wake of her death, I felt an immense emptiness. I yearned for a companion—someone whose lap I could rest my head upon and simply cry until the pain drained away. I longed for a tender hand to soothe my weary soul and breathe life back into my exhausted body. But there was no such sanctuary; no one to play that role.

Loneliness itself isn't what breaks you—I’ve lived alone for years. What is truly agonizing is being surrounded by people yet remaining utterly solitary. My days were measured by the throbbing pain in my back and neck, and by pills that felt as useless as candy. My nights were haunted by the rhythmic **beating of a drum**—the sound of my own heart, loud enough to keep sleep at bay. The constant fear of what would happen to my children in this foreign land if I succumbed to this pressure grew heavier with every passing hour.

One day, driven out of the house by the sheer intensity of the pain, I was walking and lost in thought when my phone

rang. A Swedish woman introduced herself from the **Social Insurance Agency (Försäkringskassan)**. "How are you doing?" she asked. For a fleeting, naive second, I thought a human soul had finally reached out to check on me in this money-driven world. "Thank you," I replied warmly. "I'm walking, hoping the movement might ease my back pain."
"Can't you work?" she asked.
"My only wish is to recover and get back to it as soon as possible," I said honestly.
"But can you even go back?" she pressed. "Didn't you settle your contract?"
"There is always work to be done," I replied.
Without another word or even a "goodbye," she hung up.
The next day, a cold letter arrived. "We have overpaid you," it stated. "You owe us **20,000 kronor**." They claimed that because my employment had technically ended, I was only entitled to unemployment benefits—75% of my previous pay—rather than full sick pay. After decades of working and paying over 70% of my income in taxes, I was now being treated as less than a ward of the state.
I thought back to a conversation I once had with a man living on social welfare. It was a day I was heading home, exhausted from work, and had just settled onto a train seat with a newspaper. Someone said, "Hello." Curious, I lowered the paper to find a cheerful, vibrant countryman smiling at me. "I hope I'm not interrupting your reading," he said. "Not at all," I replied, folding the paper. "A good conversation is worth far more than the news.
Are you tired? Coming from work?" he asked.
"Yes," I replied. "How can you tell?"
"It’s written all over your face," he said.
"Ten hours of labor will do that to a man."
"What do you do?"
"I’m a restorer of antique furniture."
"Are you happy with the pay?"
"It’s not bad," I said. "I take home about 14,000 to 15,000 kronor."
He nodded. "That's decent."
"And you?" I asked, happy to see a countryman in a good position. "What do you do?"
"I work for the **Oil Company**," he said with a proud smile.

"In the Swedish National Oil company?" I was impressed.
"I’m a retiree of the Iranian Oil Company," he explained. "Iran pays my pension through the Swedish system."
"But you look so young and healthy! How did you retire so early?"
He looked at me as if I were a novice. "You clearly don't know what the 'Oil Company' really means here."
"I don't," I admitted.
He leaned in, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Say it quietly so the others don't hear. Have you never heard of **The Social**?"
"Of course I have," I said.
"Shh! Not so loud!" he hissed. "Call it **'Uncle'**. Those who used to get their allowance from their fathers now call the Social Welfare 'Uncle.' But I worked and was independent. I was a political prisoner; I fled Iran and came here through the UN."
Then he unleashed a bitter critique of the system. "Do you think the Swedes are our friends? They secretly sell weapons to the regime and trade intelligence on refugees just to keep the bloodshed going. They buy our oil at a quarter of the price and sell back weapons at quadruple the cost because of the sanctions. They water their 'democracy' with the blood of our people."
He continued, his eyes burning. "If these dictatorships ever fall, their 'democracy' will collapse too, because they’ll lose the cheap labor and the stolen resources. You and I are just free labor for the capitalists. Why should I work and pay taxes just to line their pockets? I refuse to be a cog in their machine as long as they support tyrants. The government’s only job is to funnel our taxes into the hands of the wealthy. I decided I wouldn't work for them for free."
I listened, then looked him in the eye. "I agree that dictatorships are propped up by global powers," I said. "If they had the support of their own people, they wouldn't need to be tyrants. But as people who value freedom, our first duty is to be **independent**. If we are dependent on the system, we have no power to change the regime we fled from.
He laughed at my earnestness. "I’m not letting go of my rights," he said. "You won't understand me now, but one

day you'll realize who is truly responsible for our misery. Go ahead and work, but I refuse. After forty years of labor, when you finally retire, you'll see that all your hard work went into the pockets of the capitalists, and in the end, my benefits will probably be higher than your pension."
He leaned in, listing his perks. "Actually, my 'income' is already better than yours. They pay my rent, my electricity, my doctor's visits, my medication—they even bought me glasses when my eyes weakened. You, on the other hand, have to pay for all of that out of your own pocket."
I tried to counsel him: "Idleness breeds laziness and sickness; it leads to dark thoughts."
He just chuckled. "I exercise regularly, I hit the disco every week, and I'm always happy." Then, he shared a story to drive his point home:
An ambitious young American executive was vacationing in Spain. While sunbathing on the beach, he struck up a conversation with a local couple. "Are you tourists too?" he asked.
"No," they replied, "we live here. We are fishermen."
"Interesting! How many fish do you catch a day?"
"Four," they said simply.
He was shocked. "Only four? Why don't you catch more?"
"We don't need to. The money from four fish buys us bread, cheese, and coffee. We have everything we need."
The executive couldn't help himself. "But if you caught more, you could save up and buy a boat!"
"What for?" they asked.
"With a boat, you could go further out and catch even more fish with a net."
"And then?"
"You'd make enough to buy a fleet of ships!"
"And then?"
"You could build your own cannery and become wealthy!"
"And then?"
"Then you could retire, move to a beautiful beach in Spain, put your feet up, and finally enjoy life."
The couple looked at each other, then back at the executive with a puzzled smile. "But... that's exactly what we're doing right now."
The young man had no answer.

Now, after twenty-eight years of grueling labor in Sweden, the words of that welfare-recipient on the train haunt me: *"One day, you'll realize which one of us was right."*
He was right. After nearly three decades of work, I am forced to survive on barely a third of my former income. I keep thinking about what my Swedish colleague used to say: "In the eyes of the Swedish Insurance Office, the 'ideal' citizen is the one who dies exactly one month before they hit retirement."
Just as I feel a flicker of recovery, the phone rings. It's the insurance office again, cold and threatening, telling me they're cutting off my sick pay. Every time they call, the same vision flashes before my eyes:

This was the wreckage left behind by my union representative—a man who traded his humanity for a bribe. I don't know the exact price the company paid him, but it was enough for him to look at my shattered spirit and choose to trample on the truth. In a single hour, he traded away years of my hard labor.
Then came the police, delivering their own version of "justice" by washing their hands of the entire case. Without interviewing a single tenant or even asking me for a statement regarding the deaths, they sent a cold, formal

letter: "You provided no evidence, and we found none. The case is dismissed."
I called the Iranian officer I had met. "Do you see?" I asked. "They buried it without a single question."
"No," he stammered, "call them back, explain this and that..." But he never followed through himself. Every time I protested, he'd hide behind the same excuse: "We are currently restructuring the police force."
I wrote back to the department, stating clearly: "I have evidence. I want to present it in person and explain the details."
Their reply was a stall tactic: "Please provide your phone number so we can contact you." It was a joke—my number was already in the file. Still, I sent it again.
Days later, an officer called. "You closed the case without an investigation," I told him bluntly.
"You didn't send evidence," he countered.
"I wrote to you asking for a meeting to present it!" I realized he was just making excuses. "At the very least," I challenged him, "you should interrogate me for making such a 'false' accusation if you don't believe it."
He had no answer. "Give me your number again, and I'll let you know when to come in."
"Call this exact number you're dialing right now," I said.
"Fine," he replied. Months have passed since that call, and the silence remains unbroken.
I knew deep down that no news would come. The police exist to protect the interests of the powerful, not the rights of people like me who labor from dawn till dusk. This indifference dragged me back into the nightmare of those poor souls who lost their lives to greed. I tried to comfort myself: "You did your duty. You left it to the law. There is nothing more you can do."
But the cursed nightmares wouldn't let me go. It felt as though every other conscience in the country was fast asleep, and only mine was awake, screaming into the void. Now, in my dreams, the police weren't chasing the criminals—they were hunting me and my family on their behalf.
My heart palpitations wouldn't subside; even the medication felt useless now. It was as if the ghosts of my battle with the

company refused to let me go. In the midst of this turmoil, my sister called from Iran. She needed a power of attorney from me to settle our mother’s estate—specifically, a one-eighth share of our father’s house that belonged to her.
"What do you mean, a one-eighth share?" I asked, puzzled. "What happened to the rest of the paternal inheritance?"
"That was settled long ago," she replied calmly.
I was stunned. "How? I’ve been living abroad. I never signed anything. I never gave power of attorney."
"But... didn't you sell your share to Torab? Didn't you take the money?"
"Are you joking? I wasn't even in the country!"
"But Mansour," she insisted, "your signature is on all the documents."
She sent me copies of the papers, and my blood ran cold. It was true. In my absence, my brother had forged my signature on every single document. The letterheads even bore the emblems of the Shah's era. I couldn't wrap my mind around the fact that my own brother had done this.
As I dug deeper, I discovered the fraud had been facilitated through the law office of Mr. Lahoouti—the brother of Ayatollah Hassan Lahoouti. The Ayatollah was a known figure who opposed the coup against Iran’s first elected president; he was later arrested by Lajevardi and died in prison. While officials claimed it was a heart attack, his family later revealed that forensic reports found traces of strychnine poison in his system. It was chilling to think that the brother of such a man was now running a mill for forged documents.
A middleman named Zahiri, a notorious "fixer" from the old regime, had orchestrated the deal. I found out the law office had eventually been shut down for legal malpractice. When I pointed out the glaring inconsistencies in the dates to my sister, she simply deflected: "I don't know... ask our eldest brother."
She kept begging for the power of attorney. "Why do you need it?" I asked bitterly. "If they can forge my signature so easily, why do they need my permission now?" She pleaded financial hardship, hoping to sell her share to support her child living abroad. Out of a sense of duty, I finally relented.

The next day, I called my eldest brother. He spoke with a feigned innocence that made my stomach turn. "I honestly thought you had sold your share to Torab," he said smoothly. "I thought you took the cash, signed the papers, and that everything had been settled between you two in good faith.

You are the eldest," I told him, my voice steady despite the storm inside. "You know better than anyone that these signatures were forged after I left Iran. Torab couldn't have done this without your knowledge; settling an inheritance requires the consent of every single heir. You must remember when you handed him the documents, or the day you walked into the law office to sign those papers. On that date, I wasn't even in the country."

When he realized the mask had slipped—that I saw the betrayal he and Torab had orchestrated together—he tried to buy my silence. "Look," he said dismissively, "this inheritance isn't worth making yourself sick over. Tell you what, why don't you just take my share of Mother's estate?"

"I'm not talking about Mother's share," I countered. "This is about Father's legacy. You know damn well I'm not after money; I'm talking about the fact that you stole my identity. You forged my name."

"Well," he stammered, "why don't you go talk to Torab himself?"

"I have nothing to say to a man with no honor," I replied. "I am talking to you—the eldest brother, the one who was supposed to be the pillar of this family. I want to know: were you part of this, or not?"

Instead of an answer, he just repeated his hollow offer: "Like I said, just take my share of the house..."

I was struck dumb. No words could describe the man before me. The fault wasn't his; it was mine for clinging to a lie for so long. I had blinded myself to the truth. When did you ever actually have a brother? I asked myself. How could you expect brotherhood from a ghost?

He was still asleep to the world, unable to see anything beyond his **opium pipe** and the sycophants who gathered around it. A man who couldn't even help himself or his own children was never going to stand up for justice.

"Hello? Hello? Mansour, what happened?" Ramin's voice crackled through the phone, breaking my trance. He thought the line had gone dead.
"Nothing happened," I said quietly. "I apologize for calling and troubling you."
I could tell he knew the charade was over. We said our goodbyes. It was my final goodbye to him.
As I hung up, a massive weight—a burden I had carried my entire life—finally fell from my shoulders. He had done me a favor; he had woken me from my slumber. He forced me to accept that I never had a brother. I never had a family.
This was the truth my father had recorded in his documents forty-five years ago, the same truth I found in my mother's papers just last month: **I was their only child.** They knew from the day I was born that in this family, I would always walk alone.
But the thing that had haunted me all those years wasn't the loneliness.
Since the age of fourteen, I have tasted the bitterness of displacement and homelessness. I have wrestled with every obstacle, clearing my path alone, one step at a time. The hardships of life forced me to become my own father and my own mother. I never knew the warmth of a father's embrace or the tenderness of a mother's love. I lived the exile long before I left my homeland. I learned to wash my own clothes, to cook, to sew, and to mend my own shoes. I was my own teacher.
To this day, I have never coveted another man's wealth or honor. My suffering didn't turn me into a vengeful man; instead, it granted me the experience to help others. As long as I have breath in my body, I will remain a servant to humanity and the cause of freedom and independence for my people. I have never bowed to force, and I never will.
But what truly tormented me was the solitude within my own family. Ramin, my eldest brother, inadvertently set me free from that agony.
I know that healing the scars on my soul will take a lifetime. When you are wounded by those closest to you, even if you speak the word "forgiveness," something remains deep within. It's not hatred; it's the scar tissue that prevents things from ever returning to how they were. No matter

how much you try to be indifferent, the mirror of affection is shattered. The wound is there, and the ache is permanent. This was the pain that wouldn't let me go—the emotional trauma that pressured my psyche and manifested in my body: the back and neck agony, the heart complications, the heavy burden of family responsibility, the displacement from my homeland, the struggle against injustice, and the long, dark winters of Sweden. This was the environment that shaped me. I had two choices: surrender or dismantle the obstacles one by one.

In this relentless journey, my hope was in God—the One who never left my side, who always kept a watchful eye over me. And on this earth, my hope lay in the precious friends I found along the path of fighting for the independence and freedom of my people.

I once heard a wise tale:

A boy asked his father, "Father, what is our value?"

The father handed him a stone and said, "Take this to the market. Hold it up for people to see. If anyone asks the price, say nothing; just raise two fingers."

The boy went to the market. Someone asked, "How much?" He raised two fingers. The buyer said, "Two dollars? I'll take it." The boy didn't sell and returned to his father.

"Now take it to a museum," the father said.

At the museum, someone asked the price. The boy raised two fingers. The buyer said, "Two thousand dollars? I'll buy it."

The boy returned and told the story. The father said, "Now, take it to a gemologist."

The expert looked at the stone and gasped, "This stone is priceless. I cannot even put a value on it.

I found immense joy in realizing that, despite all the hardships and betrayals, I have gathered friends who are truly **priceless**. Their presence—even if we only meet once or twice a year—gave me the strength to battle despair. They gave me the courage to pick up my pen and write. And the more I wrote, the lighter I felt.

As I wrote, my tears would often soak the paper, and my hand would freeze. But I always refilled my pen with the **ink of hope**. The pen finally gave voice to everything I

had archived in the dark corners of my mind for years—everything I had been too terrified to speak.
And oh, how weightless I have become!
I made a vow to be strong and to no longer fear fear itself. I practiced this until I felt my spirit mending day by day, and the irregular rhythm of my heart finally fell silent. I returned to my cardiologist. "What medication are you on?" he asked. I named the two heart pills. "And the dosage?"
"One of each, daily."
He shook his head. "At your age, one of these does absolutely nothing. But the other—you need to take five of those a day. Come back in a month."
For that entire month, I didn't touch a single pill.
When I returned, he asked, "Have you been consistent with the medication?"
"Yes," I lied calmly.
He ran the tests and beamed. "Excellent! Keep doing exactly what you're doing."
That day, I gathered all my medications—which had once reached twelve pills a day—and handed them back to the pharmacy.
I became my own physician.
I realized that the root of all my agony was the fear of being afraid. My only cure was to make fear itself afraid of *me*.
Now, after all this time, I have returned to a normal life. I feel better than ever because I no longer dwell on fear.
I focus on life—a life with purpose, rooted in humanity, and the struggle for independence, freedom, and the rights of both man and nature. I am certain that on this path, I will never grow weary.
My deepest gratitude goes to my mentor, father figure, and friend, and to his kind wife. They were my blueprints for resilience; they taught me how to stand tall. Despite their own struggles, they managed to build a sanctuary of love and friendship.
And finally, my thanks to the Creator of the Universe, who, after these back-breaking trials, placed such beautiful souls in my path.
My gratitude goes to all free-spirited souls who have made standing for the truth their way of life. I live for the day when their numbers become countless, and when both

humanity and nature are finally liberated from the clutches of those who worship only power and gold. May joy belong to the free.
I have always striven never to break a heart,
Yet when I look into my own, I see it has been broken… time and time again.
I have always tried never to leave anyone alone in their struggle,
Yet those I counted on failed to even notice the lifelong burdens I carried.
I have always chosen to forgive,
Yet they assumed I was merely unaware of their betrayals.

THE FINAL LESSON: THE MYTH OF SAVING OTHERS

This is the sum of my journey:
The great struggle of my life stemmed from a simple cause. Because I had suffered, because I had known cold indifference, and because my life bore no resemblance to those of the "fortunate" ones, I understood the true face of misery. Consequently, I spent my entire life trying to make the miserable happy. It was the only thing that gave me peace.
I have learned that I am not the only one to taste the bitterness of misfortune. But I refused to surrender to it. I found the strength to show others the way out of their dark corners and to witness their transformation. For a long time, I believed that even amidst my own wreckage, I could deliver happiness to others.

That was the greatest mistake of my life.

I didn't realize then that neither I, nor anyone else, can truly make someone happy. Every human being must forge

their own happiness. At best, one can only be a **blueprint**—an example. And that, in itself, is the greatest task of all.
Because life was unkind to me, and because I wrestled with every obstacle that came my way—despite the permanent scars they left—I assumed I could solve everyone else's problems too. I never stopped to ask:
Does this person I deem "miserable" see themselves that way?
And if they do, have they made any effort to escape?
Do they even want to try?
Or are they like an addict?
An addict's life has only two phases: the high, where they retreat into a virtual world, and the bitter withdrawal. To escape that withdrawal, they will sacrifice even their closest loved ones just to get high again.
If someone doesn't know how to strive, or simply refuses to, every step you take for them only drags you deeper into the vortex of their misery. If you let pity guide you, you end up becoming the **coal for their pipe**—slowly burning away your very existence just so they can briefly replace their harsh reality with a false sense of joy.
This isn't just about drugs.
This principle holds true in choosing a friend, a spouse, or even in dealing with your own family.
Never befriending someone out of a fear of loneliness is the first step toward freedom. Friendship must be reserved for those who understand the sanctity of kindness. And marriage? It requires a partner who truly grasps the essence of love. Living with a lover is the polar opposite of living with an addict. An addict hollows out your life, stripping it of meaning; a lover breathes meaning into your very soul.
A lover knows no hunger, no thirst, no bitter cold or scorching heat. They are strangers to fear. Living with a lover turns the jagged stones of hardship into soft wax in your hands. To put it simply: life with a lover is heaven realized—a dream made flesh. Life with an addict, however, is a living hell.
In a family, **Truth** must be the only compass. Kindness should never be withheld, and friendship must be the foundation. Otherwise, the weight of every struggle remains

solely on your shoulders until, sooner or later, it bends your back—completely.
Regarding a mother: if God favors you with a true mother, pouring all your love and devotion into her is a blessing. It is through the grace of a good mother that, from childhood, you learn the alphabet of love, friendship, justice, and dignity—in a word, **humanity**.
I thank God that, despite lacking a supportive mother, a functional family, or a nurturing environment, I was given the strength in my darkest moments to walk away from the addicts: those addicted to substances, to power, to lies, and to self-deception. I am grateful that I learned to recognize goodness, to find true friends, and to stand beside them in building a better future—not just for ourselves and our compatriots, but for the fundamental rights of humanity and nature.
And finally, my father...
He left this world too soon, leaving me to walk alone. When I still lived in Iran, whenever I was locked in a fierce struggle, he would appear in my dreams. The last time was when I stood at the crossroads between life and death. He arrived in a Volkswagen, picked me up, and drove me to places I had never seen. Finally, he said his goodbyes on a **bridge**... and vanished.
Years later, I came to Sweden. I eventually met a fellow countryman who read the journal *"Islamic Revolution in Exile."* To collect the latest issue, I had to cross a specific bridge.
As I stood there, I froze. **That bridge was the exact same bridge where my father had said goodbye to me in my dream.**
After receiving that journal and connecting with Mr. Banisadr, my father appeared in my dreams only one last time. This time, he had a serene smile on his face. It was as if he finally felt at peace regarding his youngest son. He was at ease because he knew I was no longer fatherless; I had found my path and my mentors.
Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Mrs. Azra Hosseini, the loyal wife of Mr. Banisadr, and to my esteemed teacher and mentor, Mr. Banisadr himself, who

guided, encouraged, and helped me in compiling and publishing this book.
Also, to my dear friend Morteza Abdullahi, who helped edit this book.
To my readers: I entrust you all to your own **conscience**, for it is the most direct bridge to the Creator of the Universe.
I leave you with these two couplets of poetry—the only thing I truly inherited from my father:
The world is nothing, and all its affairs are nothing,
O nothing! Do not entangle yourself in nothing, for the sake of nothing.
Do you know what remains of a human after death?
It is love and kindness; the rest is all but nothing.
May joy be yours,
Mir Mansour Zorriyatkhah
February 3, 2025

Table of Contents

No.	Chapter Title
1	**The Youngest Child**
2	**The Story of My Father and Mother’s Marriage**
3	**First Grade: Enrollment Through Connections**
4	**A Dream of My Father and a Secret Trip to Mashhad**
5	**Mother’s Clash with Those**

	Bringing Offerings for Me
6	**Fire in the Kitchen and the Return to School**
7	**Learning to Steal from My Mother**
8	**Corporal Punishment and the Rod at School**
9	**Stealing Beyond the Home**
10	**Enrollment in the Elite School**
11	**Escaping School for the Cinema**
12	**The Death of My Eldest Uncle, My Father’s Beloved Brother**
13	**My Father’s Stroke After His Brother’s Death**
14	**Stealing from My Father’s Neighbor’s Shop**
15	**My Secret Hideout Inside a Grave**
16	**The Incident in the**

Mosque Restroom

17 **A Confrontation with a Judge During the Shah’s Era**

18 **Selling Household Goods and the Downward Spiral of Gambling**

19 **The Ugly Accusation My Mother Made Against My Father**

20 **My Father’s Torture at the Hands of My Mother**

21 **The Bathhouse Theft and Forming a Football Team**

22 **The Day My Father Left Me Alone**

23 **Mother Throwing Stones at the Neighbor’s House**

24 **Stealing My Mother’s Jewels and Running Away**

25 **The Return Home and a Near-Fatal Beating**

26 **Living with My Sister to**

	Ease Her Solitude
27	**Stealing My Brother’s Car: My First Time Behind the Wheel**
28	**Arrested and Released by a SAVAK Agent**
29	**Meeting Khosrow and Mahmoud**
30	**Handed Over to My Brother’s Addict Friend**
31	**Khosrow’s Challenge: "Smoke Hashish or Be a Mama’s Boy"**
32	**The Theft at Shapur School Library**
33	**Stealing from Within the Shrine**
34	**The Person Who Helped Change the Course of My Life**
35	**Practicing Self-Reconstruction and Redeeming the Past**

36 **The Generator Burnout and Being Fired**

37 **Mountaineering and the Attack of Stray Dogs**

38 **My Life Foretold by a Fortune Teller**

39 **The Beginning of Opium Addiction**

40 **Employment at the Electrical Firm and Starting Work in Sistan**

41 **Surviving Vipers and Other Perils**

42 **Military Service and Conflicts with Commanders**

43 **The 1979 Revolution and the Warrant for My Arrest**

44 **Deserting the Army to Join the Protests**

45 **The Shah Flees Iran**

46 **The Capture of SAVAK in Rasht and Inhumane Retaliation**

47	**Return to the Barracks to Prevent a Coup**
48	**Disputes Among the Power-Hungry Clergy in Rasht**
49	**Partnering with My Brother: The Saga Continues**
50	**Escaping from My Brother, Torab**
51	**Serving in the War with Iraq**
52	**Inventing the First Molding Press in Iran**
53	**Unemployment and Driving a Taxi for Survival**
No.	**Chapter Title**
54	**Burning Down the Prison Alongside Political Prisoners**
55	**Building a Supermarket in the Courtyard of My**

Paternal Home

56 **Accident, Altercation, Gunfire, and Prison**

57 **Visiting Rasht Committee Prison and Moving the Prisoners**

58 **The Lesson Prison Taught Me**

59 **Meeting a Merchant and the Help He Offered Me**

60 **A Verbal Conflict with an Elderly Woman and the Aftermath**

61 **Crafting Subversive Slogans Against the Coup Regime**

62 **Harassment and 24-hour Surveillance by the Local Committee**

63 **If My Friend Hadn't Arrived in Time, I Would Have Been Executed**

64 **Mother’s Return and**

Meeting a Mother Unaware of Her Son's Fate

65 **Mother's Legal Complaint Against Me and My Arrest by the Police**

66 **Institutionalizing My Mother in a Psychiatric Hospital**

67 **The Traps Set for Me by the Local Committee**

68 **Young Men Heading to the Frontlines Due to Unemployment**

69 **My Sister's Conflict with Her Husband and Her Plea for Help**

70 **My Friend Taking a Beating from the Committee in My Place**

71 **Mother's Discharge from the Hospital and Her Return Home**

72 **If Not for My Uncle-in-law, My Cousin Would Have**

Executed Me

73 **Brother's Harassment of My Mother and Her Escape from Home**

74 **Helping My Brother Torab and His Friends with Addiction Recovery**

75 **Clash with the Basij over My Low Prices**

76 **Finding My Life Partner for the First Time, But…**

77 **The Unbelievable Scene Involving My Eldest Brother**

78 **Building the First Molding Press in Iran**

79 **The Local Committee's Threat to Burn Down My Workshop**

80 **Establishing a Molding Workshop in the City of Rasht**

81 **The Story of My Marriage**

to Monireh

82 **The Strike of the Workers Who Worked for Me**

83 **The Cradle-maker's Suicide and Its Negative Impact on Me**

84 **My Brothers’ Invitation to Smoke Opium**

85 **The Decision to Commit Suicide with a Chainsaw**

86 **Migration from Iran to No Man’s Land**

87 **After Years, My Father Appeared in My Dream and Took Me Away**

88 **The Smuggler Flees with Our Money and Passports**

89 **Leaving Turkey and Being Arrested by the German Police**

90 **Escaping from Germany to Sweden**

91 **Working Three Days After**

Arriving in Sweden

92 **Meeting a Follower of the Path of Independence and Freedom**

93 **Connecting with the Girl I Was Supposed to Marry**

94 **The Employer's Betrayal and Our Conflict**

95 **Meeting the First Elected President of Iran**

96 **Helping a Countryman and His Deception**

97 **My Accountant Charged My Business Invoices to His Own Company**

98 **Conviction of Iranian Regime Leaders in the Mykonos Trial**

99 **Troubles Caused for Me by the Swedish Secret Police**

100 **Forcing My Lawyer to Withdraw Through Threats**

10 **Helping Tenants and**

1 **Escaping Traps**

10 **My Wife Woke Up to Find**
2 **Half of Her Face Paralyzed**

10 **Arresting the Spy Who**
3 **Deceived Asylum Seekers**

10 **Employment at Driftia and**
4 **Beyond...**

10 **Attempts at Building a**
5 **Fuel-Free Power Generator**

10 **My Wife's Pregnancy After**
6 **18 Years and the Baby's Cancer**

10 **The Person Who Caused**
7 **Tenants' Deaths for Financial Gain**

10 **The Bad Luck That Always**
8 **Found Me on My Birthday**

10 **Intense Threats and**
9 **Harassment: My Mental Health Struggle**

11 **The Psychologist Who Was**
0 **a Patient Himself**

11 **The Day I Realized My**

1 **Mother Loved Me**

112 **The Final Lesson (The Sum of My Journey)**